Stay

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Stay

by the_most_happy

Summary

“Oi, Dazai, what are they saying, anyway? Too many people. It gets confusing.”

The detective smirks.
“They are just discussing the budget for the next mission. Kunikida insists he wants an ice cream, a drone, and a goat.”

From the Port Mafia dungeon to the depths of Meursault, Dazai and Chuuya keep finding each other.
They fall in love all over again — or, maybe, they never stopped.

That’s all.

Notes

The absurd amount of research and discussions with my severely HoH cousin have changed me more than I thought.
I loved writing this fic so much, and I hope you guys will enjoy it too.
P.s: All the signed language used is JSL. Happy to share the whole list of the learning resources I used.

See the end of the work for more notes

Dazai has been in love with Chuuya for six years, two-hundred days, fifteen minutes, and two thousand-forty-three seconds.

It was never a choice.

It was always fate.

Throughout the years of suppressing his feelings for his partner, he has been keeping tabs on the time and resources he spent on his crush.

- Almost eight years of pining.
- Twenty-eight notebooks of grievances.
- A hundred and five bottles of wine he ruined after breaking into Chuuya's penthouse.
- Two hundred and sixty-four missions together.
- Four years since their last meeting.

Take the last point, for example.
Dazai has put a lot of effort into this reunion, and it's going exactly as predicted. He might be in love with Chuuya, but he expected everything but a warm welcome and a kiss on the forehead when the executive walked down the stairs.
He's not surprised when he's greeted with a kick.

Dazai has never deluded himself that their first meeting after he left the mafia would be peaceful.

Doubling up, he spits a mouthful of blood.
He wheezes out a breath as the air gets vacuumed out of his lungs, and his bones crack, and the collision sends him flying backward. He hits the wall.

He feels his back colliding with the stone first, then a deaf pain, and finally, the explosion of broken bones blooms in his ears.
He tries to breathe. He can’t.
Just pain. And red. And flames. Pain and blood and pain and concrete and white-hot stars blinding him, and pain again.

“You call that a punch? It doesn’t even count as a massage,” Chuuya taunts him, knee lifted mid-kick and preparing to load a second one, hands in his pockets. “Did ya become slower?”

Dazai twists his mouth.
He tries to predict the direction of the mafioso’s next kick as he braces for more pain. Chuuya’s hits have grown faster and less rushed with the years, although his kicks pack the same mighty strength and destructive force as when he was a teenager.
His training paid off.

The second Chuuya's knee hits his ribcage, Dazai's bones crack, and an unpleasant taste floods his mouth.

Blood in his lungs. It's not a good sign.

"You wish," he replies; he hopes his dismissal cuts deep. "A Slug has been training?"

"A Mackerel has been slacking off."

"I suppose that's not wrong." Dazai shrugs, carefully palming his stomach to assess the damage to his ribs. Just touching them makes him flinch. His lungs feel tender, and he must be bruised all over the stomach because breathing causes white burning stars to bloom in front of his vision.

Chuuya doesn't reply. He allows Dazai a moment to assess the damage and calculate his next move, preparing for more.
It wasn't even an honest duel. *God,* Dazai thinks.
Did Chuuya truly become stronger during these years, or was he always like that? Is this *anger?*

He can't understand.
Not understanding pisses him off.
Not understanding his partner — someone Dazai regards as an extension of his soul — annoys him out of his head.

"You don't think we're done, do ya?" Chuuya growls, arching like a bullet ready to dash forward.

He slips his gloved hands out of his pockets, too.

The executive loads the new kick so gracefully — his eyes glimmer and his hair bounces, tongues of fire framing his chiseled jawline — it's almost a pity to stop it.

In response, Dazai turns away and looks at the dirty floor. His lips curl into a sharp smile. Ah, he knows they are not done; Chuuya didn't free him from his chains to chitchat. Nonetheless, he needs to buy time — just enough for his head to stop spinning, and to make peace with the pain that is immobilizing him. He's unsure how much more internal damage he can take without losing consciousness.

He covers his face to cough, and every single bit of his internal organs hurts.

"That eager to get your hands on me?" he whispers — almost talking to himself, tasting iron on his tongue. When he coughs again, his bandaged palm is stained with blood. "Did Chuuya miss me that much?"

He's not looking at Chuuya, but he doesn't have to. The silence that lingers between them is tale-telling.

It tells Dazai that he’s guilty as charged.
Well.
He is right *and* guilty, but there are worse crimes than making his absence noticeable.
He expects Chuuya to start protesting and screaming at him, but he says nothing. The lack of reaction settles in Dazai’s lungs.

He never wanted to harm Chuuya when he left the Port Mafia, although he classified the man’s suffering and possible sense of betrayal as unavoidable collateral. However, knowing that his partner missed him — even if briefly — kindles a spark in his chest.

“Dazai…”

Chuuya's timbre rings serious enough to make him lift his head. “Yes?”

“Can you repeat that?”

He beams, spotting the perfect opportunity to spite the redhead.

“Ah~ no way!”

There’s another heartbeat of silence, then Chuuya lurches closer. With a hint of surprise, Dazai realizes that the man is approaching him with a certain weariness, not to seek a fight but to seek communication.
“No, shithead, I’m being serious.” He grabs Dazai’s hair with such violence that his hand quivers, dragging him down to eye level. Dazai gapes, not expecting the wave of soreness when gloved fingertips clutch at his scalp. “What you just said,” he hisses. “What was that?”

He licks his lips. "Aw, is Chuuya embarrassed? Does Chuuya have a crush on me?"

It wasn't a serious question, *obviously,* and he never expected a serious answer. But then, without words, Chuuya tugs a strand of red hair away from his right ear.

Oh, Dazai thinks. *Oh.*

Although his eyes dart to a black ear cuff behind Chuuya’s ear shell, his brain glitches before he can put a name to what he's witnessing. Something shiny, with a smooth surface that reflects the light of the dungeon — plastic.
Black plastic, linked to what looks like a tiny circular magnet secured to the executive's scalp. It doesn’t look like a microphone or a bug.

It takes Dazai a second to recognize a hearing aid. Then, another second to compute the fact that his partner — the same one he left four years ago with no signs of degenerative illnesses whatsoever — is wearing a device to hear.

It must be a joke.

“Chuuya...?”

He can’t formulate any question further than that.
The redhead’s face screws up before relaxing.

His timbre is quiet when he says: “I’m deaf.” It’s a statement — and the slight irritation that nuances Chuuya’s comment has nothing to do with his hearing capabilities and everything to do with Dazai. “Well. Hard of hearing, actually. If you care about the difference.”

Dazai’s jaw drops. He can hear it hit the ground, or maybe it’s his stomach hitting his calves, or maybe it’s the world stopping.

It makes no sense.

It makes *no* sense, he repeats to himself. For once, he finds himself without explanation and a thousand question marks he can’t deal with.

“But you hear me.”

Chuuya’s lips twist. “I can’t lip-read if you talk to yourself like a madman.”

Dazai swallows. “So you… did not hear what I said?” The other ducks his head. *Well, that changes things*. “I asked if you missed me.”

“Ha?!”

“But it doesn’t…” The sentence trails off, meaningless. His lips retreat in a thin line as he looks away, but then he stops and faces Chuuya before adding: “It doesn’t matter. I was just making fun of you.”

As if the axis of the conversation shifted to something more important, Chuuya glares at him. If stares could kill, Dazai would have been murdered twice over. “Bastard. I didn’t miss you one bit.”

Well, now Dazai knows for a fact that his partner was dealing with bigger real-life issues than missing him. He probably had no time to spare mourning his defection.

The thing is, Dazai was not prepared to face any change. He expected to find Chuuya exactly as he left him: short, hotheaded, strong, and beautiful enough to make a man swoon.

He expected they would fight. They would trade barbs, and then say, ‘You honestly didn’t change,’ before sauntering away from their reunion with the pleasant, safe feeling that time can’t change their bond and their dynamic.
Double Black was supposed to be untouchable. *Chuuya* was supposed to be untouchable.

He wasn’t prepared for this.

He couldn’t imagine… *this*.

Oddly enough, it almost offends him that Chuuya hasn’t made the change obvious from the second he stepped into the dungeon. It’s dumb, and it wasn't like Chuuya *should* have greeted him with a list of all the things that changed in his life. It’s not fair. Still, Dazai can't help but think he would have *wanted* to know.

“So you can’t hear?” Dazai emboldens himself to ask, in a scant but necessary intrusion. He keeps his tone even, his words clear.

“Congrats, ya really are a genius.”

“But we are talking.”

Chuuya’s expression twitches; it’s a subtle change, caught between sardonic and annoyed. “Ain't context and hearing aids wonderful things?”

“You *speak."*

“Huh,” Chuuya says, eyebrows darting up and disappearing behind his fringe, as if he’s taking a double guess on what Dazai has just said. Dazai wonders if the confusion is due to his suddenly high-pitched timbre or the agitation warping his expression. It might be because he just said something obvious, though. “Well. Yes, I do.”

"And you don't sound..."

Chuuya grimaces, his grip over Dazai's hair hardening enough to make him groan. *Not* in a good way. "Don't fucking go there or I'll kill you," Chuuya hisses, and Dazai doesn't doubt it for a second. "I mean it."

“I just— I don’t understand.”

Letting go of his brown curls and moving away, Chuuya’s lips clamp further down.
The eye contact is new.
In the old days, Chuuya swore that looking at Dazai in the boy’s single visible eye gave him the creeps — now, he seems to have no other choice but to search for something he always avoided. And he *does* sound different, but it's a nuance that Dazai could barely notice before it punched him in the gums.

“Then watch a YouTube video, Dazai. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“How did it happen?”

Now that he knows, Dazai is utterly conscious of the movements of his face, of the timbre and level of his voice. He wonders if they’re clear enough.
He wonders what kind of emotion he projects to the outside world, and what Chuuya will pick up from the parting and closing of his lips. He's so focused on himself that he almost misses Chuuya’s answer. *Almost.*

"An explosion."

He blinks. "What? When?"

“Some asshole blew up my car a few months after you left,” Chuuya says, sheepishly rubbing his neck. It sounds like a story he’s told before. “I forgot my keys, and I was just going back to get them. So I was too close.”

That piece of information is the last thing Dazai can focus on. He needs nothing else, and he refuses to go looking for pieces of a puzzle he doesn't want to solve.

A car.

An explosion.

A goodbye.

The joyless smile that twists his lips freezes and cracks like a flower covered in ice.

It's still in place, but it's dead.

"Ah," he says. *"Ah."*

He can't even say sorry.

—

Dazai speaks 25 languages.

He can converse fluently while passing for a native speaker, if he tries, and has no problem understanding complex texts in most of them.
That is, without counting the several dialects he either speaks or understands.

Dazai knows 25 languages.

Sign language is not one of them.

—

"When he was eighteen, Port Mafia executive Nakahara Chuuya lost 80% of his hearing because of an explosion damaging his eardrums."

That's Dazai's very special greeting to the woman who just walked into the room.

To be fair, Kouyou doesn't seem surprised to see that the former Demon Prodigy managed to sneak into her private office uninvited. Hidden in one of the many pleasure houses ruled by the executive, protected by guards on the outside and traps in the office itself, the room remains locked from the inside at all times and should be impossible to infiltrate.
'*Should* ' being the keyword, of course, whenever Dazai is involved.

"Hello, lad," she says. "Long time no see."

Dazai ignores her words, arms crossed, sparing nothing but a swift bow of his head to show respect. Instead, his gaze wanders to the private garden and sky outside the sliding panel of the shoji door — staring at the distance as guilt and doubts toss and turn in him. He suspects he would appreciate the majesty of the traditional villa, a sight that equals the gorgeousness of the *O'kaa-san* of the establishment, if he weren't too busy trying to make sense of what he discovered in the dungeon.

“A beautiful night for a visit,” Kouyou prompts him. The politeness of her words makes him smirk.

“Right. But I’m afraid I didn’t come here for the services of your house, Ane-San.”

“No,” she murmurs. “You’re here for *him.”*

Bingo, Dazai thinks.

The breeze swooshing in from the parted sliding door swells the edges of his trench coat, but the cold that plagues the detective comes from inside his bones.

“Chuuya’s car, a red Aston Martin, exploded in the parking lot of Mori Corp, building 3. It left him severely deafened.” The detective fights to keep his cadence monotone, and he leans against the most faraway wall of the office while his mind travels back to many years before. “It was a Wednesday.”

And it was sunny, and I was grieving for my best friend, he thinks. The memory of the night when he planted a bomb under Chuuya's car and scheduled the explosion escapes him, blurred by the ache of those days. The reminiscence of the pain he went through still makes his skin crawl.

Losing Odasaku will always hurt, and it’ll always shape his present self. He’s grown into a man who saves others thanks to and *because of* Odasaku.

But the consequences of that day he barely remembers hurt *now,* they hurt *today.* The anxiety makes him nauseous.

After a moment of silence, letting the words simmer, Kouyou moves toward him. Her heavy layers of silk — pink and crimson and peach, a vision in shades of red — swish as she gets closer.

“I see you’ve done your homework.”

“His file says he’s hard of hearing. Is that the correct definition?”

Her eyes narrow. “You never bothered with the correct definition of anything before, not when it concerned Chuuya. Why would you change it now?”

“I don’t know, respect?”

She snorts. “Don’t offend me with your lies, lad.”

Despite his usual composure, Dazai’s serene facade falters as he combs a hand through his hair.

Feigning confidence is not so easy when his heart beats sluggishly around barbed wire.
Sometimes, he forgets about the dungeon.
Sometimes, he gets the impression that nothing has changed between him and Chuuya.

But then he remembers — he *always* remembers.
And when he does, the wire around his heart tightens.

His heart bleeds.

“Ane-san, if I understood correctly, you were the one who caught the culprits of the explosion.”

Beautiful and cutthroat, Kouyou’s very existence is a lesson in politics. In her pause, Dazai can read scorn. “That’s what happened, yes.”

“Why did you do it?”

“To avenge my precious pupil, of course.”

“You executed the wrong people knowing from the start who was beyond the accident with Chuuya’s car, and you said nothing.” She *must* have known, or she would have allowed Chuuya the satisfaction of catching and murdering the culprits himself. “Is that why you invite Chuuya over to help him with his conversation skills every two weeks? Do you feel guilty for lying to him?”

Although her jaw sets, Kouyou doesn’t reply immediately — and not for a while either.

In the beginning, Chuuya used to see a therapy speech specialist thrice a week.
Digging out the old bills and having a chat with the underground Gifted therapist who helped Chuuya has been a child’s play; his sound-amplifying ability salvaged some of his hearing and helped Chuuya figure out sounds and words.
He still visits him once a year, according to the documentation.

But *Kouyou* is the one who meets with Chuuya over tea. She is the one who answers his questions about sounds he can’t quite pronounce, or that he doesn’t remember.

The woman paces deeper into the room, the heavy silk of her kimono rustling as she walks.

She might point a knife at his throat now, and he would barely realize it until a moment too late.

“Should I be the one feeling any guilt, lad?”

Shouldn’t you be the one prostrating at my feet?

Dazai gnaws at his bottom lip.

"It was a prank," he whispers, grief and panic seeping into his voice.

"I know.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him. It was an accident, I—“

“I *know,* Dazai,” she interrupts him. “You both were always beyond violent with your pranks, don’t think I don’t remember — and we can’t blame you for that, either. You are children of the mafia, both of you.” Her lips turn into a line, and her eyes scan Dazai's face. "Did Chuuya tell you, or did you find out?"

"He told me," he admits.

He trusted me, he means. In hindsight, he is surprised that Chuuya talked to him at all.

"In all frankness, yours was not the only explosion Chuuya ever went close to. And the several times he strained his body because of Corruption didn’t help,” Kouyou says, plummeting on a sofa as if she couldn’t stand the weight of her own words anymore.

Dazai looks at her and doesn’t ask to sit, nor he tries to. He just wants to flee — flee, and *forget.*

“So it wasn’t entirely my fault?”

Oh, stupid hope. Silly, silly hope.

Kouyou kills it with a shake of her head, though, and slips one of her pins out of her hairdo. She suddenly looks exhausted. “Dazai, this is not about faults—”

“So it *is* my fault.”

“Yes, it is,” she says. Dazai pretends it didn’t punch him.

“I’m surprised Mori didn’t find a Gifted doctor.”

“Don’t you think we’ve tried? That *Chuuya* didn’t try?” Kouyou cuts him off, with an edge in her voice that silences Dazai’s attempt to find an out. “He was brave, and initially there seemed to be hope. That hurt him the most — those few days of uncertainty, not knowing if he’d get better. Not knowing where *you* were. It might not seem that way, but medical trauma took a toll on him. For a long time, all Chuuya could fixate on were the things he could not do anymore.”

“Was rehabilitation…?”

Kouyou’s lips retreat into a ferocious line. “Hard? Strenuous? Painful? Take a wild guess, boy.”

Right. He better calibrate his questions more wisely.

“Does Chuuya suspect anything?”

She seems to take a moment to ponder over an answer that would satisfy Dazai’s curiosity without exposing Chuuya.
It’s a delicate line to toe, truth.

“If he did, he never told me — but I suspect it doesn’t matter much,” she replies. Even as she shakes her head and exhales, fidgeting with the pin she removed earlier, her little gestures cut the silence like blades. “You should tell him.”

“About the accident? I can’t.”

“You can, and you must.”

“How *can* I?”

It’s strangled, and it’s pitiful, and it might be one of the most genuine questions Dazai ever asked in twenty-two years of life. It *must* be, because Kouyou’s lips twitch down and her thin eyebrows arch.

“You’re scared,” she murmurs. It sounds surprised, as if she didn’t know Dazai could fear anything; funnily enough, Dazai did not know genuine fear either before facing the possibility of telling Chuuya that a *prank* caused his deafness. “Sit with me, boy.”

Warily, without peeling off his gaze from the way Kouyou pats the empty sofa next to her, Dazai obeys.

His legs waver just so as he reaches an empty chair covered in pink velvet – it’s not next to Kouyou, as he still doesn’t trust her enough to get too close, but it’s a sign of reciprocal understanding.
From the way she bobs her head, the peace offering is appreciated.

“You have reasons to be worried.”

Dazai scowls. “Damn right, I do.”

“But you must trust that Chuuya will understand. If your heart is sincere and you tell him, he will forgive you.”

Dazai shudders in silence, unable to look away from Kouyou as he waits for a crumble of pity.
He truly must be desperate. “I’m not so sure, not this time.”

“There was no intention in your actions.”

“But I made him—“

He caused Chuuya’s deafness.
Ah. He sounds like an asshole if he puts it that way, doesn’t he?

She turns to face him as an older sister would face a child. *Don’t make me scold you,* her eyes say.
It’s been a long time since someone treated him with such familiarity.

“Dazai Osamu, you disappoint me,” she replies. “Don’t you trust your partner?”

The jab hits him with no mercy. His shoulders drop.

"You know I do," he whispers.
He admits it under his breath as if the world is not meant to hear it. Out of all the government-jeopardizing information Dazai stores in his mind, the most precious secret he guards will always be his feelings for Chuuya.

He's kept the secret close to his heart for so long, now, that uttering it out loud terrifies him.

But *Kouyou* was never afraid to confront him with the truths he doesn't want to accept.

"I've seen Chuuya grow, lad. I know him better than Boss does — perhaps, I know him better than even you do. And I know he would forgive you for anything." Kouyou pauses. "But let him find out from someone else, and you'll lose him forever."

—

Silence is something that intimately links him to Chuuya, now.
It was never the case before.

They were a duo that people would define as loud, a bundle of noises and shouts absorbing everything around them. Their rotten bond was the best and the worst thing that had ever happened to each other.
Their partnership has always been egotistical. Egocentric. *Ego* has always been the core of Double Black; they mattered and everything else didn't.

For two people who claimed to hate each other, they have always been the center of one another's world.

However, as he types up a report on his laptop, Dazai finds that he's not looking back at those times necessarily with nostalgia.
Double Black is not something he misses. It's not about the 'good old days'.

It's about the *future* of his relationship with Chuuya.

All the detective has to do is adjust to this newfound balance, looking at Atsushi while he grabs a bunch of documents from the nearby shelf and ignoring Kunikida's ramblings about his non-existent work ethic.
He allows days to pass from the conversation with Kouyou. Every hour looms over him like a monster.

He waits until he can't escape anymore.

One evening, he waits for Chuuya in the hall of Mori Corporation.

As he waits, the detective sits on the black leather couch, legs crossed, his trench coat opening around his thighs.
Everything in him — from his clothes to the spark in his eyes, to the smile crossing his face — is light-shaded, relaxed. It forms an odd contrast with how every single object in the

waiting room is black and lacquered, screaming *posh villain hideout.*
He can't believe he used to work in such a depressing, unremarkable building and refused the urge to burn it down every single day.

But Dazai is a man on a mission today.

He idly follows the baseball game on the big screen, tilting his head as the ball hits the bat as if he could better empathize with one object or the other.
He watches the action on the screen as if he can get in a game he gives no fucks about, if he tries hard enough. God, he certainly would love to have a bat taking him out *now,* before he can face his partner's wrath.
It'd make everything so much easier. It'd be a blessing.

"…Dazai?"

And here he is.

Quickly, he offers Chuuya his phone — he has prepared the message already, in case his courage forsakes him.

'Can we talk?'

Chuuya frowns, taking the cell phone with both hands.
He reads the message twice, then passes Dazai the device. With a serious expression, he turns his head toward a meeting room, and mouths: ' *this way'.*

He doesn't speak, and yet he does.

It's another loud, tiny difference from the Chuuya Dazai used to know.
It's like watching a movie without audio, and he has to remind himself that yes, Chuuya didn't speak out loud.

Just another tiny change he will get used to.

As he follows the redhead into the meeting room and closes the door behind his back, Dazai thinks about the resonance of a gesture; the power of a soundless word.

'I have something I need to tell you,' he types on his phone before turning it to Chuuya.

Chuuya smirks as he reads the screen, standing in the meeting room with the unspoken confidence of someone who's grown up between the walls of the most terrifying building in the city.
He doesn't invite Dazai to sit. Dazai doesn't get too close, either.

From the way the executive's lips stretch, he doesn't foresee anything major — and Dazai's stomach drops, because he knows and Chuuya doesn't expect what is about to happen.
He thought he was used to carrying the burden of secrets, but he wasn't.

"We can talk, you know," Chuuya says, irony woven in his voice as he crosses his arms over his chest. He looks relaxed, but it's a *farce.* Dazai can see right through it while barely

keeping his anxiety in check.

"I'd rather write," he counters, voice leveled. "For clarity. So..."

He points at the phone, and Chuuya shrugs the invite away. *Whatever,* the redhead seems to say, *it's the same for me.*

'Oh lord,' Chuuya writes, tipping the brim of his hat with his free hand. *'What masterfuckery of a plan is it, this time? What do ya need?'*

Dazai breathes in.

One.

He closes his eyes.

Go.

'I bombed your car.'

Chuuya blinks. *'But I got here on the bike.'*

So he's playing dumb.
This reaction is exactly why Dazai wanted to have a written conversation — so they can't spend hours running in circles. Chuuya would have refused to lip-read properly, hiding behind excuses and pretending to be dumb, but they can't escape the conversation forever. It's too important, and Kouyou is right.
If Dazai doesn't tackle it, that explosion will destroy them.

'Chuuya' he writes, forcing his fingers to work as they actively refuse to bend. *'Your car. That car. The explosion.'*

Night falls over Chuuya's expression the second he reads the message.
The light in his eyes winks out, and he dips his head and stays silent; he has nowhere to turn and nothing to tell himself to avoid the truth.

Shrinking, Dazai keeps himself at a safe distance.

A looming voice inside his brain whispers that Chuuya has known the truth all this time — they know each other too well to leave space for any kind of misinterpretation.
He must have recognized Dazai's handprints all over the explosion and refused to compute the information.

The next message confirms it:

'I don't wanna hear it.'

Dazai swallows.

“I’m sorry,” he says. Chuuya eschews his gaze, though, and his hand remains limp and unresponsive as Dazai pushes his phone in his direction.

‘I’m sorry,’ he wrote there. Again. He insists knowing Chuuya didn’t hear him clearly — maybe he didn’t hear Dazai at all, willingly.
It’s hard to tell, and it’s fucked up and it’s his fault and the gravity of it dawns over him all at once. He vouched to protect his partner — with his brain and his Nullification — and he messed up.

With trembling shoulders, Chuuya refuses to look at the phone.
He doesn’t look up — he refuses to look at him or witness him or *listen* to his motives, and Dazai’s heart cracks.

“It was a goodbye joke,” the detective tries. “You were meant to be out of the car already.”

“A joke?!” Chuuya roars, eyes locking with Dazai’s and opening his arms.

His raspy voice slightly rounds at the end of the word.

“Chuuya, I—“

“Shut the fuck up!” It’s like a clap of thunder. He saw what Dazai was saying, and didn’t mind interrupting him. “Do you have any fucking idea of how it was for me? The speech therapy, the nightmares? The fucking adjustments? Was a fucking joke worth it?!”

When he opens his mouth, nothing comes out.
He has no excuse, and doesn’t even care to find one when confronted with Chuuya’s hurt.

“Was your amusement worth *this,* Dazai?”

"No," Dazai whispers. "I never wanted to hurt you. It was like with your punishments for me — a *joke*.”

A violent, dangerous joke.

Chuuya gapes, then stops.

He takes out his phone and quickly scrambles a reply — his face is lowered in the direction of the screen as if the words are much more interesting than Dazai's confession. As if not looking at him might give Chuuya a perfect excuse to ignore him.
It’s easy to be cut out of his partner’s universe with this new dynamic. All Chuuya has to do to raise his walls is to take off his implant or look away.

He twists his nose, and deletes a sentence and types up some more and deletes it.

Tick, tick. Delete. Silence. More words. More words get deleted.

When he hands him the phone, Dazai accepts it with shaky fingers.

‘Leave.’

He doesn’t even have the solace to hear Chuuya say it to his face, but he guesses he doesn’t deserve it.

Head dropping, he steps away. He leaves.

—

Dazai’s ability number in the government’s official reports has always been N0000.
Even his office-assigned number is null.

Chuuya always made him human. Chuuya always made him belong.

—

Considering the past, Dazai didn’t think he would ever get paired up with Chuuya again.

It was something he was sure of when he left the Port Mafia, and the recent revelation had only cemented the suspicion that their partnership is done for.
He half-expected Chuuya to ask Mori to not partner them up anymore, no matter what.
His partner didn’t want to have anything to do with him — and rightfully so.

He was alone in his dorm room, surrounded by empty bottles, drunk and simmering in guilt when he shot the man a text. Their history seemed worth one last desperate attempt to reach out in the middle of the night.

To: Chuuya
> I’m sorry for ruining your life.

Chuuya answered immediately.
He sounded offended for a reason Dazai could not pinpoint.

From: Chuuya
> Don’t insult me by thinking my life is ruined, asshole.

To: Chuuya
> It wasn't an insult

To: Chuuya
> Just leave me alone, Dazai.

For several nights in a row, after that, Dazai tortures himself by wishing he could ask the redhead what he meant. Wishing he could get in Chuuya’s brain and suss out how he was supposed to act and what he was supposed to say.

But, as they are called to face the Guild as a united front, it doesn’t matter. Their personal life might be a wreck, but their partnership remains one of the strongest weapons in Yokohama.

'Be ready to sacrifice yourself for the weak and the innocent' is the rule of thumb of the Agency. It’s a mission Dazai has sworn to live by, and that seemed too similar to Odasaku’s last wish to not sound prophetic.

But Chuuya isn't weak or innocent.
Yumeno, sleeping as the executive hoists them on his shoulders, heavily drugged and barely breathing, is certainly *not* innocent.

Then why, Dazai wonders, trailing on his partner's heels. Why would he sacrifice everything to save Chuuya?
Why, while they make their way out of the depository where the Guild hid Yumeno, is a prickly sense of nostalgia choking him?

"The night you left, I opened a bottle of Petrus from 1984 to celebrate."

Dazai bows his head. The sound of their steps in the storehouse fills his ears, keeping him alert. "Why, thank you."

"I didn't mean it as a compliment, you ass," Chuuya replies, casting him a pointed glance while he adjusts Yumeno on his back. Dazai doesn't ask him if the kid weighs too much because, frankly, even without the cast, he wouldn't lift a finger to help. If Chuuya calls him out on his (entirely intentional, mind you) uselessness, he has already decided to fall on the floor and throw a full-on tantrum.
They can leave Q there for all he cares. He's still going to keep the doll, though.

"Then *how* did you mean it, Chuuya? Because I'm sure as hell that I didn't point a gun at your head and tell you to waste one of your best bottles on poor silly me."

"Ha! So you agree that you're silly."

"Why?" Dazai drawls, cutthroat. "Why a bottle of Petrus?"

The way Chuuya takes a moment to answer tells him that he's asked the right question.

"It was a celebration."

"Because I was gone?"

"Because we were free from each other," Chuuya says. Then, he scoffs. "Well; that's what I thought, yet here we are."

"Here we are indeed."

Humming, the detective thanks the good that Chuuya is too busy glancing at the door of the depository to notice how his shoulders went rigid. Suddenly, he needs to run for the hills, leaving the pre-school mass murder machine and Chuuya to deal with the rest.

"Oi, Dazai. I have been meaning to ask, but what the hell is the deal with your bolo tie?"

Almost tripping over his feet, Dazai's free hand runs to his chest while still holding the doll in the crook of his elbow. "What about it?"

“Don’t play dumb, you dickhead.” Chuuya’s eyes narrow. “That’s the Hope Diamond, don’t think I wouldn’t recognize that little troublemaker. I told you it was cursed, and you said ‘thank you’ and *fucking* stole it.”

Dazai briefly considers lying about it before realizing it’s not worth it.

The Hope Diamond was one of the first diamonds the newly-promoted Chuuya acquired when he started working in the business of smuggled jewelry. After being bought by the mafia, the gem has been considered missing from the black market for the last six years. No one ever bothered looking in the bolo tie of a no-name detective from an underground detective agency.
Dazai always considered it a gift even if Chuuya never actually handed it to him. After all, the redhead never tried to get the gem back.

“You still have a sharp eye for gems.”

“Yeah, I guess. It kept me alive,” Chuuya replies with a shrug. He’s making an effort to look at Dazai, reading his facial expressions, and the detective rewards it with a sharp smirk. He tugs at his bolo tie.

“Does Chuuya want it back?”

Chuuya seems *offended* that he’s even offering. “You could’ve given it back when that shitty thing was turning my life into a nightmare. *Now* you can keep it.”

“Good, because I like it. It reminds me of Chuuya’s eyes.”

“Surely I misheard.”

Delighted, Dazai beams. “Surely you *didn’t.”*

“You know, you make me want to throw my implant in the ocean so I can stop hearing your nonsense.”

“Your Slug shortness can always lip-read.”

“I’ll talk to you with my eyes closed, so I don’t have to see your Mackerel face.”

“Aw, that’s petty.”

“Fuck you.”

“Midgets first,” Dazai volleys back, finishing the sentence before swinging his arms open and dropping into a dramatic, deep bow.

Chuuya only *tch*- es, allowing the matter to drop as a semi-comfortable silence rolls over them again. A silence that Dazai has no intention to keep, considering that a part of him doesn’t want to hear his own thoughts when he is around his old partner. They are loud and often dirty. “Well, wouldn’t Chibi look at us? Collaborating like civilized people.”

“As if we had a choice.”

They are almost at the door. Almost out. Almost *victory.* It feels a little too easy, but Dazai is not going to complain. He stops a few steps away from the executive, his hooded gaze lingering over Chuuya’s face and finally resting over Yumeno.
The child has nuzzled against Chuuya’s neck, sinking his face in fierce red hair, and a buzz jolts down Dazai’s spine.
Just when he thought he couldn’t hate the little psycho more than he already does.

“Chuuya.” Dazai’s face hardens as he allows his masks to retreat. A split second of *honesty.*
“For full disclosure, I was against this. Atsushi — the weretiger you guys hunted down — is a kind person. If it wasn’t for him and the President, I wouldn’t move a finger to help Mori.”

‘I was against this from the beginning.’

Chuuya screws up his face. “If ya want to give me an earful for the weretiger, save it.”

“I’m just saying I’m not ever coming back.”

Chuuya scowls. He looks like he might fight back or punch him in the face, truce be damned, but he doesn’t have the chance to comment.

They don’t have much time to discuss the rest at all, considering that a green tentacle (gross) lands over their heads like the wrath of god (and God is clearly on the side of the Guild), destroying the roof and grabbing Dazai.
For a brief second, his mind flies to Yumeno. He hopes against hope the thrust will kill the little devil.

But it’s a short-lived thought as a slimy tentacle cuts his breath short, seizing his limbs. It reeks of seaweed and murky water. The next thing he feels is hot. Searing hot.
Then, the wind slaps him as he gets hurled across the forest.

Well, being hurtled into a tree by a sea-monster wasn’t *exactly* on his bucket list.
The flash of worry in Chuuya’s eyes as the executive dashes to him — screaming his *name.* Dazai’s heart flutters, and he’s not sure if it’s the concussion or infatuation — makes being tossed around by a giant squid worth it, though.

At least, he supposes, that he can sign with the cast out of the way. That’s something.

Still, frustration simmers in Dazai as he stares at Chuuya and then at the monster. Lovecraft’s partner must be hidden somewhere, too, taking cover and unleashing those annoying. For the first time during the night, he wishes he’d put more effort delving into the intel on the Guild.

As his mind kicks into battle gear, he realizes that they are done for. Lovecraft is something *beyond* an ability. They lost Yumeno and the creepy doll, which can turn into a small catastrophe.
He can’t direct Chuuya and, at the same time, he low-key resents that the other doesn’t need directions to put up a fight against the Guild. They don’t need that kind of shouting and

screaming to understand each other, but Dazai has been reliant on verbal communication for so long that he's reluctant to let it go.

Suddenly, he realizes it's not about what they can do; it's about what he is *used to* doing.

But how many times before did they make it work without talking to each other, relying on eye contact and mutual trust?
How many other times will they be forced to find a way?

Because they are fake-arguing in the middle of a battlefield, and everything feels exactly like Dazai remembers.

"Are you done ordering me around like a dog?" Chuuya all but barks.
That's familiar, too.

"I would use a sheepdog if I had one, but all I have is Chuuya."

"I've got no idea what you're saying, but fuck you too," Chuuya volleys back, challenging him with a clenched jaw. "So, what's next?"

Dazai bats his eyelashes. "We die?"

"Ha?!"

Yeah, he thought as much.
The reaction is enough for Dazai's cheerful attitude to fade away, dropped in favor of a hooded glare.
He knows Chuuya won't like what he's about to say. Too bad it's the only thing he can come up with when a legit *monster* is towering over them.

"Look," he says, with a happy bounce in his tone. "I have a plan. But it won't happen unless you're okay with it."

His hands scamper in the air, mimicking single words in sign languages he halfheartedly researched many weeks ago *just* in case. Words he prayed he would never have to use.

Demon. Monster. Bang.

He hasn't found the word for Corruption, yet, if there's one — but Chuuya touches his hat, eyes widening.

"Oi… You mean Corruption?"

Dazai snaps his fingers. "Yes," he says, scanning the word with his entire body. He speaks around the gravity of it — his eyes, his mouth, his arms, his throat.

Chuuya's eyes roam across his face.
They don't look for understanding, but for reassurance — there's a tinge of hesitation in the way he purses his lips as if he's swallowing a bitter mouthful of air. "You mean, like, now?"

“Only if you want," Dazai mouths.

"Do I have a choice?"

His heart clenches. "You know you always do."

It’s a bullshit reassurance, and they both know it.

Whenever Dazai asks Chuuya to take a fight into his own hands, surrendering his consciousness to the raw power of his own Ability, there’s never truly another way to win. Arahabaki is always the last resource, and Dazai won’t take it lightly.

‘Ok’ ‘you’ ‘no’, he gestures — meaning ‘*it’s okay if you say no’,* because their trust comes first. He can find another way.

Or they can die. That’s an option too.

Chuuya ponders over the opportunity for a second, then *tch*- es.

“Ya better take me home safe,” he says.

Saying that he steps away. *It's showtime.*
There's something that kicks in whenever Chuuya resolves to use Corruption -- something that turns Dazai's blood thicker in his veins, making it simmer with something akin to awe. It's *hot.* God. It's hot, how Chuuya pushes his chest out when confronting death. How he greets destruction like an old ally.
His eyes are alive with adrenaline, a cocky expression morphing on his face as he lifts his hand and bites off his gloves.

Before he can wander too further away to be reached, though, a newfound urgency surges in Dazai. He reaches forward, grasping Chuuya’s wrist to stop him.

“Wait,” he calls, — realizing too late that he probably startled Chuuya by grabbing him from outside his vision range. *Shit,* he thinks, letting him go as if the contact mauled at him. *I forgot I can’t just grab him like that anymore.* “How do I say 'I promise'?”

For a heartbeat, Chuuya doesn’t move. He looks puzzled; he looks *wary.*

Then, slowly, he lifts his hand and sticks out his pinkie.
He’s facing Dazai, resolute, blood-bitten lips tinged with the softest shade of red, when he says again, “Take me home safe.”

With a solemn nod, Dazai wraps his little finger around Chuuya’s own. He shakes their interlaced fingers.

I promise; the oath of their partnership is etched in their interlaced fingers.

“I’ve got you, partner.”

—

“You left me there, you ass!”

...So, they survived.
Setting the fruit basket on the table and padding to the side of his partner's hospital bed, Dazai shrugs away the accusation.

He did no such thing. He cleared the area and called a black car to ensure that someone would take Chuuya back to the collection point, but he also has no intention of explaining his actions or motives. He has his partner's back, and that's the bottom line.
In fact, *not* leaving his partner behind is exactly the reason why Chuuya is looked after and surrounded by flowers and fruit baskets in an underground hospital, regaining his strength after Corruption, and not dead in a ditch.

Dazai might have not piggybacked him home, but he did protect his partner.

You were cute while you slept, he signs, rubbing with his right hand the back of his clenched fist.
That’s one of the ways he has seen cute being expressed, at least - even though he’s not entirely sure about what he said.
He might have just accidentally said that an opossum crossed the road in a maid dress, he’s not sure.

The point is, he’s putting in a genuine effort to learn signed Japanese. The catch is that Dazai has seldom tried anything in his life before. Usually he is automatically prodigious at everything he does, so he hopes Chuuya will appreciate the effort even if he sucks.

“—What?”

“I’m learning sign language,” he explains, trying to match every mouthing of his lips to the ones in his hands.

Then, he touches his right hand to his left palm, sideways, fingers stiff as he rehearses the movements in his head: *I’m sorry, Chuuya. Really.*

Chuuya shrugs.
He eyes Dazai from the bed, brows pulled low before finally signing: *It's okay.*

I just wanted to make sure you were okay, Dazai answers. *I will disappear if you want me to.*

As Chuuya mulls over it for a moment, he finds himself thinking that the entire ocean is trapped inside his irises.
They’re rain and stubborn water, those eyes, as he stares at Dazai and looks like he’s about to cry. Then, throwing back his head, the redhead lets out a heavy sigh.

“Dazai,” he says. He stops, almost wondering how his words will sound — what tone will he use, and how will that come across? It seems like an exercise in softness, as if Chuuya is carefully calibrating his words to make them no heavier than a feather. “About your message. I appreciate the intention, but your actions somewhat changed my life. You changed it. You didn’t ruin it.”

“I did something awful.”

Chuuya hums to himself. “My life is not ruined,” he insists. “And sure as hell it’s not miserable, or worth your pity. You haven’t been part of my fuckin’ life for a long while, and I’m fine, and you must understand that.”

For the longest moment, he tries to wrap his head around that seemingly senseless sentence.

However, as his eyes roam across Chuuya’s face, he must admit that he doesn’t see a ruined life or a miserable existence; he sees a mafia executive, a beautiful man. A loyal dog. A partner.

“Ah,” he says, suddenly realizing what part of his apology sounded off.

Chuuya frowns. “What was that?”

Just ‘ah’, he writes in his phone, and shows it to Chuuya. The man’s frown deepens, and Dazai takes back the device to add: ‘*did my apology offend Chuuya?’*

“Exactly.”

‘I didn’t want to make it sound degrading,’ he types.

Chuuya nods once Dazai indicates the message on the phone and, briefly, he pats his own sternum twice. *I know.*

It’s basic enough that Dazai can grasp it on the first try, but he can’t help but wonder if Chuuya added the signed word for his sake — a courtesy after he expressed his desire to learn.

“I know, but you still made it sound shitty. And I need time to deal with that,” Chuuya adds, speaking so very slowly. “Time to figure out if I want you in my life, for a lotta reasons.”

Dazai’s head drops.

“Sure. I would need the same,” he assures.

Then, Dazai’s hands hesitate a moment before moving through the space.
He rotates his index fingers one around the other a couple of times before shaping two Cs with his thumb and index fingers. *Sign language.* He touches the tips of his thumbs, raising his arms a little as every C is shaped a little higher in the space between his collarbone and his nose — once, twice. *More.* He points at his head. *Learn.*

I want to learn more sign language.

Chuuya’s eyes follow the movements in silence.

His gaze hones just a little, as if he’s torn between looking at Dazai’s mouth or at his signs. He gnaws on his bottom lip as if fighting against the urge to add something that, in the end, he doesn’t say.

“Suit yourself,” he just growls.

When Dazai leaves the hospital room, he feels heavier and lighter than he was before that conversation.

—

Dazai is called to retrieve a certain hammered Chibi from a bar in Asakusa after the bartender phoned him to ‘collect his drunk friend’. The redhead is snoring with his head pillowed in between his crossed arms, in a position that shouldn’t be normal *nor* comfortable.

Now, they are not friends. Obviously. They’re rivals, and they are devastating and they are enemies. Chuuya would start screaming and throwing a fit if he discovered he has been matched with ‘the likes of a Mackerel’.

Dazai wouldn’t say they are friends, either.

Nonetheless, he lets the definition slide.

He takes Chuuya home carrying him piggyback, walking into the crisp spring night with the executive on his back. Cherry blossom petals fall like snow around them, twirling in the wind, and Dazai lifts his head and thinks that the world is truly beautiful.

It’s pretty, this devastated city of theirs. Maybe it’s worth dying for, after all.

“It’s going to be summer soon,” he murmurs into the night. Chuuya mumbles in his sleep, nuzzling into his neck, tickling the skin. He groans against Dazai’s skin and holds onto him closer, although he doesn’t wake up.

It’s a good night.

The moon is beautiful.

As he crosses the streets with his partner on his back, Dazai catches himself humming.

--

“You’re having too much coffee,” Chuuya tells him once they bump into each other during a joint meeting.

To make a long story very short, the upper brass agreed that having the two major Gifted organizations in the country going one against the other with the Guild wasn’t that beneficial for anybody, so they *had* to talk out their differences. Frankly, the only point that Dazai cares to negotiate is to throw away the key to Q’s room and call it a day. Mori’s unwillingness to promise that is stressing him out.

Hence the coffee.

Hence why Chuuya sneaks up on him at the vending machine on the 23rd floor — the one Dazai tampered with to give him extra, extra, extra sugar. And that also works as a secret

transmitter, but that's another story.

Serenely, Dazai faces the executive. Chuuya's eyebrows rise as he realizes that Dazai is holding a pink mug filled to the brim in one hand and a stack of documents in the other.

"Aw, Slug. Is there such a thing as too much coffee?"

"Damn yes." Chuuya motions to the mug. "Five in two hours is too much."

Dazai shrugs. "Whatever."

"What was that?"

"I said whatever."

"You're gonna get a heart attack one of these days."

Once again, Dazai shrugs the concern away and raises his mug in a toast.

Would Chuuya cry for me? he thinks, and realizes that he'll never ask. "Here's to hoping," he says instead.

These days, he only speaks to Chuuya if the executive talks to him first. Deep down, a silly part of him hopes that the abnegation of his own desires will earn him enough good karma to get closer to his ex-partner. Like he's proving a point.
Too bad that his point is *never* proven.

Chuuya keeps his distance, and Dazai keeps hoping against hope that things will take a turn.

—

In their world, there is no mercy for the weak.

That's a truth Dazai has first confronted when he was too young to fully understand its scale, and that witnessing the death of the old boss has cemented in his brain.

The moon shone crimson, that night, its bloodstained light reflecting in his eyes — the eyes of a kid already violated by a murder he didn't comprehend.

The moon shines red tonight.
It rises above the fog created by Shibusawa, shy, gazing upon a decimated city like a distant god.

The feeling of being inside a dragon lingers over Dazai's body, cold and wet.

It feels like it's been raining inside of him, like he's been standing in a winter storm long enough that the damp air soaked his muscles and corroded his bones. The stab wound on his back pulsates in the front of his brain, a presence he forces his muscles to ignore.

At least, the familiar body weighing on his lap is warm.

Chuuya's uneven breathing reaches his ears — heavy, tired — together with the rustle of clothes, with the echo of distant battles. They're both sitting among the debris, just two ghosts in the destroyed city.

Chuuya's nestled between his thighs — ass up, face on Dazai's lap, battered but surprisingly awake — in a position that is… well. Allusive is a way to call it. The executive's bare fingers graze Dazai's thigh as he adjusts in between his legs. Silently, the detective blesses the wounds and mission keeping him distracted, or he'd be thinking bad thoughts. *Dirty* thoughts. His cheek is bruised where Chuuya punched him, but it's easy to ignore it when every inch of him hurts.

"Well," Dazai says, when the executive looks up; he smiles despite the pain lacerating the entire upper half of his body. "That was good teamwork."

Fuck, he thinks. Chuuya's between his legs. *Act cool, Dazai. You've got plenty of people between your legs. Act cool.*

When Chuuya snorts, it sounds openly dismissive.
But then he straightens up a little and taps his chest with four fingers, eyebrows furrowed and almost touching his nose. *Are you okay?* It means.

Slowly, taking a moment to assess the destroyed city and the cracked concrete and debris in their surroundings, Dazai nods. Then, he points at Chuuya with his index finger.

"Yeah," he says. "What about you?"

Face twisting in open discomfort, Chuuya seems to gather enough strength to gently touch his forehead with the side of his fist. His movements are heavy. Sluggish.

"I feel sick," he clarifies.

"Lay down." He gently presses a hand over Chuuya's head to keep him close to No Longer Human. To his skin. And— God. Even covered in dust and sweat, Chuuya's hair is soft. His body is trembling, strained by the effort of unleashing Corruption. "I don't want to protect you from your Ability, now."

Chuuya scoffs, and Dazai's grip over his head eases up just enough to let him look up and read his lips.

"My ability has been hammered inside of me," he reminds Dazai, looking at his face to read his emotions. He's taking some time to pick his words. "When Tainted turned up with the fog, we bonded over insulting the bastards who made us this way."

Just like Dostoyevsky. After such an answer, he can't help but consider how similar Chuuya and the rat can be, when it comes to their abilities. Rubbing a hand over his face, letting it rest on his chin and pressing his palm over his mouth, Dazai mulls over the similarities between the temporary allies he just left and the criminal who saved him.
Shibusawa is a problem of its own, but Fyodor is friendly with his ability.
In the mist, Dazai is only safe because his Nullification is secured so deep inside him that

nothing will ever touch it; it's like a scared child in a locked room, trembling with his knees hugged tight to his chest. The light's off in the room, darkness blanketing everything, to keep the kid from seeing himself in the mirrors covering the walls. It's a safe, monstrous, stifling room.

That's where No Longer Human lives.

But Fyodor, like Chuuya, doesn't need to keep his ability locked and buried to be safe.

'H'm,' the detective lets out, too distracted to pay attention.
Chuuya frowns as he straightens up more, trying to translate Dazai's expression as he can't read his lips. His arm still rests on Dazai's knee, though, keeping their physical connection.

"What was that?"

"I didn't say anything," Dazai clarifies, immediately turning to Chuuya and dropping his hand. It rests on Chuuya's hair again, more like a caress than a way of keeping Chuuya in place.

Even as he pats his chest twice, so very lightly, (Got it, it means) Chuuya doesn't seem to believe him.

"You found me."

"Like that was hard," Chuuya grumbles, eyes narrowing as he adjusts more comfortably on Dazai's lap. He rests his chin on the joint between Dazai's leg and torso, and the detective's body *stills*. Damn. "I just had to look for the giant dragon and go straight to the masochistic bitch inside of it."

"Well, that is not very flattering."

"Your dimwit plan wasn't flattering. God. Every time I try to understand your shithead ideas, brain fluid starts leaking from my nose."

"That's graphic~"

"And from my ears," Chuuya insists, pointing at the side of his head.

Dazai's stomach tangles a little at the comment, and especially at the mention of Chuuya's hearing, but it's less invasive than it used to be.

There is something that he has learned, in the past months, and it's that Chuuya is Chuuya. He is no different from the boy Dazai met when they were fifteen — he didn't change any more than Dazai did.

"Chuuya, I…"

"Well, don't you have places to be? The kids count on you, you know?" Chuuya interrupts him, waving a hand to stop him from continuing. "You can go help them. I'll take a nap."

“I’m not leaving you.”

“I’m not *asking* you to.”

“You need to rest.”

“Dazai, go help the kids before the little shits get themselves killed or so help me God, I will drag you all the way to the battlefield by the ear.”

Faraway, the low rumble of a pile of debris crushing into the ground causes Dazai to flinch and turn. Chuuya grimaces too, following the direction of his gaze to understand the source of the noise. Although part of Dazai would die to know what he heard, he doesn’t ask.

“See?” Chuuya says as if the interruption just proved his point. It didn’t, because the distant echoes and noises are coming from another direction and not the battlefield, but Dazai refuses to comment on it.

After unleashing Corruption and draining his strengths, Chuuya doesn’t need to know where the battlefield is. In fact, it’s better if he doesn’t know at all, lest he’ll have the brilliant idea of joining the fight while convalescent.

But for now, all Dazai can do is lean forward, manhandling Chuuya’s weak body by the shoulders to straighten him up a little. Not a lot, just enough to wrap him in a hug. He buries his nose in Chuuya’s shoulder, breathing him in.
It’s a grateful hug, the kind they have not shared in years — and, come to think of it, Dazai never stopped to thank his partner properly for rescuing him from a *dragon*.

The rigidness of the body in his arms tells him that Chuuya didn’t expect it.

So far, he never bothered to hug Chuuya without a secret agenda. Which is all levels of odd, when he thinks about it.
Dazai always considered himself a physical person.
He *likes* poking Kunikida and stretching Atsushi’s cheeks and sneaking up on Tanizaki to wrap an arm around his shoulders. But, before now, he never realized that the genuine touches he shared with his very own partner had been rare and blood-stained.

When he pulls away, Chuuya looks for eye contact. Taken aback, he searches for something he missed not knowing that the explanation is all in Dazai’s head.

“Chuuya,” he says. He savors the name. He takes ownership of it. He breathes it around the fog that hasn’t lifted yet, uncaring about the air smelling of dust and blood.

“Yes…?”

“Just wait. One day, I’m going to be worthy of my Snow White kiss,” he declares, and beams at Chuuya’s shocked expression. He forms a reversed V with his fingers, palm facing himself, and smiles.

See you, it means.

—

After the battle, they don’t mention the hug again. They don’t speak at all, and Dazai has to remind himself that he saw it coming.

—

Working together as Double Black is not always easy.

The level of symbiosis and abnegation their partnership requires is not simple in the slightest. Dazai will happily explain to anybody willing to listen that the way he and Chuuya trick people into thinking that their communication is seamless and never-faltering is just a testament to their professionalism.
It *looks* easy. That’s about it.
Easy is an illusion.

It was troublesome when they were teens, and it’s definitely complex with the cards that they have been dealt as young adults.

Sometimes Chuuya can’t hear and Dazai can’t communicate, and they are stuck.
There’s a line in the sand that they cannot cross, as they grasp for a sign of understanding.
It’s frankly less common than it would be between two people who don’t know one another like the back of their hands, but it happens.
They dance between the *Can Not* and *Won’t Try.*

At times mutual frustration can bloom from these moments of missed understanding, but disregarding or not acknowledging those moments would do a disservice to his relationship with Chuuya.
They're humans. Setbacks happen.
Their relationship is complicated and evolving — the adjusting is inevitable and sometimes daunting, and it comes with the occasional moment of looking at each other thinking ‘Now what?’

What matters is the mutual will to work around their differences. Even as he casts a side glance at Chuuya – who is sitting next to him and pretending to pay attention – Dazai is sure they will make things work.

They always do.

No one knows about their fight and the part Dazai played in the explosion, and that’s why he suspects that Mori always forces them to sit side by side during joint meetings; they are *the* token partnership. The truce. The two soldiers who stitch Agency and Port Mafia together, albeit begrudgingly.
Too bad that technical details are dragging the meeting, and Dazai would gladly jump in the river and die to escape the rest of the conversation.

Two hours to discuss a plan against a flower-growing Ability User must be illegal.

Desperate, he pokes Chuuya's shoulder to attract his attention. He passes him a notebook and a pen.

'Meeting's boring. Should we sneak out and get a beer?'

Chuuya looks at him with an arched eyebrow, a little perplexed about the whole situation.

He once said that 'yes' and 'right' can take him a long way even when he's not entirely understanding a context, but Dazai is attentive when it comes to his partner — he knows the pauses in his breathing, the twitches of his mouth, and how the light reflects in his eyes. When he used to wear bandages on his face, Chuuya would cover his blind spot.
He used to be Dazai's eyes, so he doesn't mind being Chuuya's ears when the other needs him.

'We can't leave in the middle of a meeting.'

'For a petit mafioso, Chuuya surely sticks to the rules. Good dog <3'

He's not surprised when Chuuya hands him back the notebook with a scribbled: *'Fuck you.'*

'Sorry if you can't handle the truth, Double Black (small).'

'Society's worst misfit,' Chuuya replies, and Dazai is surprised to find in his written notes the bite that usually would be in his voice.

Or maybe it's because of the beam that Chuuya shoots at him, triumphant and charming and enough to make Dazai's heart hiccup.

Then, Chuuya's fingers hover over the pen for a moment longer. It takes a further second of embarrassed hesitation, then he adds: *'What are they saying, anyway? Too many people. It gets confusing.'*

'They are just discussing the budget for the next mission. Kunikida insists he wants an ice cream, a drone, and a goat.'

A frown settles on Chuuya's forehead as he reads the message. *He never said that,* he gestures.

Dazai pats his sternum. *I swear.*

You're an asshole, Chuuya signs.

"Dazai-kun, Chuuya-kun," Mori calls them, voice melodious. "Please, pay attention."

It's enough for Dazai to turn his head and face the man sitting at the other end of the table, registering how Chuuya follows the gesture with a taut neck and a sour expression. He never enjoyed being scolded during briefings, too used to being the responsible half of Double Black. Being put on the spot stresses him out.

Dazai never minded much.
Mori can scold him all he wants, and he always took a mischievous pleasure in dragging Chuuya into his schemes while everybody suffered their contumacy.

“My apologies, Boss,” Chuuya mutters.

Dazai says nothing at all, instead focusing his attention on the notebook to add another message. When he slides the object in Chuuya’s direction, however, it’s more discreet than before. *‘Seriously, though, Mori-san said we’ll get a debrief email, so you don’t have to worry. Let’s leave.’*

Chuuya seems to consider it for a moment, combing a hand through his hair.

‘Let’s wait and ask the others to get a beer too,’ he quickly writes in a corner of the page, and Dazai can’t help the discontent that dawns on him. It compresses his chest for the briefest moment, although he offers Chuuya a grin.

“Yep, okay,” he mumbles, knowing Chuuya will read his tone and think that everything is okay. But it's not.

He *wants* Chuuya.
Or maybe he just wants Chuuya to see his lips, and take their existence into account. Lips that could cover Chuuya’s own.
Lips that could do so much more than the boring, everyday stuff like talking and smiling and breathing. They could put them to better use, and kiss until their faces hurt and there’s nothing left apart from their intertwined bodies.

The truth is that Dazai has wanted to kiss him for a while. A long while, to be fair, and still can never muster the courage to dare a first step. Are seven years too many to pine over someone? Does that make him a hopeless man with no chance at all?

With Chuuya, it was love at first fight.
From the moment a scrunkly teenage boy pinned him down to the sordid ground in Suribachi, Dazai knew he would find no one else more worthy of his devotion — a benevolent god, a lover to worship. He still had no clue about Arahabaki, at the time.
Back then, he couldn’t imagine that he had just put his young heart in a safe and handed it to a literal living Singularity, but that changed little.

Because Dazai loved Chuuya like a teenager, first and foremost. That little spark didn’t belong to the Demon Prodigy. It didn’t belong to Ability User N0000 Dazai Osamu of the Port Mafia. It has always been just Osamu.
He loved Chuuya unapologetically, with his complete self, with infinite softness and terrible communication skills. For his entire life, he has always loved him in secret.

But the point is: Dazai has wanted to kiss him for a long time. Right now, more than ever. Because now Chuuya is addressing him with two thumbs up and doesn’t suspect that, in his mind, Dazai is kissing him.

—

“Ne, Chuuya. You don’t use sign language a lot, right?”

They bumped into each other on a side road in China Town because, apparently, Yokohama is too small for both of them. No surprise that Dazai had to relocate to his hometown in Tsugarou during his hiding years, or he would have run into his old partner after two days.

He doesn’t necessarily hate the idea of walking home with his old partner, with the frenzied crowd of the rush hour beelining for the train stations while they decided to walk and avoid the chaos, but their meetings are getting ridiculous.
He *is* trying to give Chuuya space. He *is.* But he would argue that it's not his fault if they can't go two days without accidentally running into each other.

“Not really. For security reasons, a lot of people don’t even know.” Chuuya pauses, tapping his bottom lip as he thinks. He’s wearing civilian clothes and no hat, and the deep circles around his eyes tell Dazai that the man is overworking himself again. “My immediate subordinates do. But at first, I think Akutagawa assumed I was plain ignoring him.”

Which, as Dazai knows, is a story of its own. “How very Akutagawa-kun.”

“Then he thought I was mad at him since a certain someone used to ignore him when displeased.”

“Huh,” Dazai says, hooking an index finger around his collar to breathe more comfortably. “Right.”

“Kid was mad relieved when he heard I was *just* Deaf.”

Rolling back his head, Dazai explodes in a chuckle. Then, stopping at a crossroads and deciding that he’s going to avoid any discussion about Akutagawa and his past mistakes, he looks at Chuuya. *I’m going right,* he signs. *Do you have plans? We can go for a drink.*

I have dinner with Ane-san.

Sounds fun. Where to?

Ramen place downtown.

Chuuya stops when Dazai stares at his hands for a second too long with a furrowed brow. “This means ramen, by the way,” the executive clarifies, speaking and slow-motioning how he crossed two fingers and cupped his right hand, mimicking a gesture of eating. Eating *noodles.*

Ah. Right, Dazai signs, his fingers curling into a circle before he can even think of speaking. He finds that he jumps a lot from one language to the other — in the middle of a sentence, even — and it’s annoying and thrilling at the same time.

“Oi. Have you been practicing, Bandages?”

Instantly, Dazai beams.

Did Chuuya notice?! He signs. His chest warms up with pride when the other man nods — kindling a new, unfamiliar spark of accomplishment.

You're getting better.

Why, thank you, Slug~ I'm putting a lot of effort into avoiding work, you know~

Frowning, Chuuya stops.

"It's odd, though," he adds. It's enough to make Dazai's head snap upward, his attention entirely concentrated on Chuuya's pout.

"What?"

"Your signs," Chuuya says, gesturing at the detective's fingers. Then, he adds: "They're nothing like your voice."

What do you mean? Dazai signs.

Your voice was cheerful most of the time. You sounded like a damn squeaky toy. But— His hand hesitates mid-air as he reflects on the next words. It's the same as always: Chuuya starts speaking, and then he stops, and backtracks, and then speaks fast again. He's always been impulsive, but not thoughtless. *Your gestures are melancholic. I suppose they are like your eyes. Sometimes, they are scary. It's like you can't mask your feelings with your hands, unlike you do with your voice.*

Blinking, Dazai tilts his head to the side and waits for an explanation that never comes. Ever since their reunion, Chuuya has barely mentioned his tone at all — and the detective never asked, considering it a little invasion into a world that really shouldn't concern him.

What do you mean? I always use a funny voice when I talk to Chuuya. It's the voice I would use with a dog!

It's a gentle voice, he mentally corrects himself.
Not that he's ever going to admit it out loud, though, and especially not to Chuuya.

Chuuya's eyes narrow. *Why are you doing this? For real. You don't have to go out of your way to accommodate me.*

Because I'm bored, he answers.

Chuuya lifts an eyebrow, not entirely sold. "I said for real, fuckface."

Why does Chuuya ask? Dazai asks. Are *my gestures weird?*

No, I wouldn't say weird. No, they are… sharp.

Pride stretches his grin. He's never going to forget this conversation as long as he lives. *Is Chuuya calling me handsome?*

You wish, Chuuya answers in a heartbeat, his face darkening as if Dazai has crossed an invisible line. *Dickhead.*

And maybe he *is* a dickhead.
Maybe he's an idiot with no boundaries and no self-respect — but that's what love does to him. It turns a genius into a madman.

"Well," he says. "Too bad. Because I—"

Then, he steps closer with one hand in his trench pocket. He's going to be punched if he doesn't leave fast enough, but it's going to be *worth* it because of what he's about to say. A soundless confession.

His hand lands on Chuuya's hair, patting his locks as he looks at another point —a safe, invisible dot just above Chuuya's head. Rubbing somebody's head means 'you're cute'.

'I think Chuuya is cute.'

With that, he walks away before the other man can punch him in the shins and accuse him of ridiculing him by calling him *cute,* of all things.

Unexpectedly, though, Chuuya doesn't call him back to demand an explanation. And the silence falls over Dazai like snow. It falls, and it falls, and it slowly freezes his hope to death.

—

"Is Chuuya-san French?"

Dazai blinks. His stomach drops.

The occasional mispronunciation of a few words makes him sound foreign, but not even Dazai can tell if it's because of the accident or because he spent several years on missions abroad.

Although he doesn't see Chuuya often, these days, he has noticed that the executive always tries to speak whenever he's not with someone he trusts. He rarely ever signs in public.
He speaks fast, and smiles a lot, and never breaks eye contact in a way that is equally charming and magnetic.

It's easier this way, he once admitted to Dazai. *In our line of work, it's just easier.*

He didn't say if it was harder than signing, and didn't explain further.

"Why do you ask?" He asks back, slowly lifting his head from his laptop. He wonders if Kyouka knows, but she follows the conversation quietly from her desk and doesn't talk.

Atsushi shrugs.

"He called that man — Paul Verlaine — brother," Atsushi explains. "And according to our intel, the man is French. Chuuya-san is not, as far as I know. So…" He scrunches his nose. "I

don’t understand the logic, here. Is it like a mafia thing?”

Ah.

Instantly, Dazai’s shoulders sag as an unspoken fear melts away from his chest. It has nothing to do with the way Chuuya sounds, he has to remind himself, and it’s equally reassuring and embarrassing that he thought about it in the first place.

“I’m afraid that’s classified information, Atsushi-kun,” he answers. “And I recommend against asking Chuuya directly. It’s a touchy subject.”

“Verlaine-sama is a sad person,” Kyouka adds, in a quiet cadence that only betrays the slightest hint of affection — and only if one puts in the effort to really listen. Nevertheless, the sprout of sincerity surprises Dazai, too; no one likes to talk about their years in the mafia, but Kyouka barely ever addresses her training at all. “He likes crepes too.”

“Does he?”

“He was kind to me,” Kyouka adds. “Kind and sad.”

Atsushi gawks. “You know him very well, Kyouka-chan?”

She nods. “He trained me.” A pause. “Me and Gin-Chan. And he’s Chuuya-san’s older brother, but Chuuya-san is not French.”

“I’m quite sure that doesn’t make sense,” Atsushi answers.

“The Slug speaks French, though,” Dazai adds.

“Really? Ah, Chuuya-san sure is cool.”

“Cut the fangirling, brat. Nakahara is an enemy,” Kunikida chimes in.

If he only knew about the amount of time Dazai spends fawning over the man, though.

“I speak a lot of languages too~” he complains, only half-serious, slumping onto his desk.

“Of course! Dazai-san is very cool, too,” Atsushi assures. It sounds so genuinely affectionate that Dazai can’t help but keep smiling for the entire day.

Yet, Atsushi certainly has a point: Chuuya is the coolest person Dazai has ever met.
The person he loves.
The partner he lost.

—

The next time he sees Chuuya, the first thing Dazai thinks is that his partner is a sight for sore eyes.
They meet by chance, in a bar not too far away from the bay. It’s a weekday.
Chuuya is partying with his squad and Dazai is silencing his demons, drowning his fate in

alcohol. He's alone, and his old partner is surrounded by people who look up to him and the detective never felt quite so *lonely* as he does tonight.

Despite that, however, the redhead doesn't seem to have joined whatever his subordinates are celebrating.
Standing a bit away from the crowd, with his hat next to him and sleeves rolled up, the executive is cradling his drink like it's a cup of warm tea, gaze lost in the distance.

As he plummets on the stool next to his former partner, Dazai flags the bartender for a glass of whisky.
The lighting is not great either. Therefore, when Chuuya frowns and points at his ear, Dazai picks up the hint and takes out his phone.

'Having fun?' He writes, looking as the other reaches for his own phone and opens their chat.

'I've taken out the squad after a dangerous job. They sure as fuck deserve a beer tonight.'

The reason for the celebration is none of his business, and Dazai refuses to pry.
Whatever the Port Mafia is doing, he'll draw the line at politely collaborating for the sake of Yokohama.

The bartender with the doe-like green eyes gets him a glass of whisky.
She's cute, and she smiles at him, and Dazai smiles back but all his attention remains on the man next to him.

Chuuya's presence is magnetic even when they just sit side by side, basking in one another's company.

'A mission?' Dazai texts.

Chuuya denies that with a heavy shrug.

With his index finger, he traces a 678A operation in the air. Finger-spelling isn't Chuuya's favorite way of communication, and Dazai reads a certain level of exhaustion into the choice.
He saves finger-pointing for when words escape him and he can't or won't sign.
For the first time, he stops to wonder if Chuuya's too exhausted to even text.

Dazai can't blame the man for being spent. '678A' used to be the code of denomination he assigned to armed raids in enemy territories, on occasion, mostly to retaliate and sedate uprisings in minor cells affiliated to the Port Mafia.
No matter the side involved, people used to die like flies during those raids.
He's not sure about the statistics anymore, but things might not have changed much if Chuuya feels like he has to reward his subordinates for surviving the night.

Fun, Dazai gestures.

You wish, the executive answers, his gestures hasty. At least, Dazai thinks Chuuya said, 'you wish'.

He must look confused, though, because the redhead sighs and grabs the phone again, writing: ‘ *I wish.’*

Close enough.

'I don’t have to work tomorrow,' he texts. *'What about you?'*

Chuuya looks at his screen for a second, then throws a glance behind his shoulder.
Half of his squad will be drunk anyway considering the ruckus that comes from their tables, so there’s not much the executive will be able to do.

‘I don't have to hand in the report until Friday,’ he replies.

‘Want to take the drinking to the Agency’s dorm? It’s less noisy.’

With a slight scowl, Chuuya brings his index fingers together.
He touches them one against the other warily as if Dazai just proposed something against all rules.

Together?

“Yes,” Dazai mouths, tapping his chin against his hand.

Not a sound leaves his mouth.

He’s moving his lips, but not his voice.

He doesn’t expect Chuuya to take on the proposal, but he might have underestimated the executive’s thirst for a drink and some peace and quiet.
A place doesn’t have to be loud to be overwhelming, and Dazai’s head already started pulsating unpleasantly at the staggered rhythm of the music and the drunkards singing a few steps away. He can only imagine how much the cacophony of sounds might disorient the redhead.

Chuuya glances at his subordinates again, taking a moment to consider his possibilities.

Leaving with Dazai. Staying. Doing nothing of that, perhaps, and going home. Every possibility flashes across his face before the executive rubs his eyes.

‘I’m leaving anyway after this drink,’ Dazai adds, somewhat encouragingly. ‘*You are welcome to follow me or not.’*

When he wakes up in his own bed the next morning, Dazai realizes he doesn’t remember how he got there.
He remembers alcohol — lots of it. Lots of beer, for sure, and a choker and a hat. And lights. And a light punch landing on his arm, playful; intimate.

Someone also changed him into a clean shirt, and Chuuya is sleeping next to him.
The vision causes his heart to jump. He looks so peaceful, with his head buried in the pillow, and—

Wait.

Chuuya. Sleeping. *Bed.*

It takes all of Dazai's strength to not jump and scream his lungs out.

What the hell, he thinks. What in the frozen hell just *happened* ?
His breath steadies a little as he realized that Chuuya is still wearing an oversized pair of grey sweatpants *(his.* Oh Lord, those are *his.)* and doesn't seem marked anywhere.

If he knows himself, Dazai is quite sure he'd leave bites all over Chuuya's body if given the chance. He'd mark him for everyone to see.

Of the previous night, he remembers… *things.*

Which is a nice way to say that he remembers practically nothing but the fact that he and Chuuya didn't— most certainly — do anything Jesus would frown upon.

(But that Dazai would greatly enjoy.)

They chatted, he remembers that much. They laughed and reminisced about the days when they used to complete missions and go straight to the arcade.
What he does remember, however, is the warmth of Chuuya's shoulder under his cheek.
The scent of the cologne Chuuya still uses, clean and salty.
A ghost kiss as they took turns smoking from the same cigarette, and now Dazai's room smells like smoke and smoke will forever remind him of Chuuya.

Chuuya who is now sleeping by his side, with messy hair and parted lips, and Dazai thinks he might be hallucinating. *Except* for the obnoxious ringing of an alarm; that is pretty *damn* real. Really annoying, too.

"Chuuya," he murmurs, shaking Chuuya's arm gently. "Your alarm is ringing."

The other rolls to the side, groaning in protest as he escapes Dazai's touch.

Unrelenting, Dazai shakes him harder with one hand while stretching the other arm to silence the phone, face twisted into a displeased scowl as the ringing pierces his ears.

"Why do you even have an alarm you can't hear," Dazai groans, mostly to himself.

He knows Chuuya has an app that alerts him of alarms and emergency signals — earthquakes alerts, apocalypses, fire alarms, Mori calling — on his phone. Normally, that is. There must be something wrong, though, because the alarm woke him up at ass o'clock while Chuuya is still happily sleeping and drooling like a dog.

He's so *pretty* when he sleeps.

(Yes, he drools. Yes, he's pretty.)

Against his better judgment, Dazai raises a hand to touch the russet locks spread over the pillow, opening around Chuuya's relaxed expression like the petals of a fiery flower. Like tongues of fire.

His eyelashes flicker. His chest heaves just so with every breath, dropping with the light raspy sound that Chuuya rolls out of his parted lips — not quite snoring, but also not breathing silently either.

And those lips—

Fuck.
His lips are slightly open, teeth peeking out, pale with some dried-out drool at the corner of his mouth, and his breath must still taste like wine and it may be disgusting but Dazai wants nothing but to kiss him.
Maybe he can steal one.
He fantasizes about it as his thumb travels to Chuuya's chin — to the soft cushion of the man's bottom lip.

In theory, Chuuya's lips won't miss one tiny kiss.

He leans closer. Too close. Dangerously close.
Dazai's breath catches in his throat as he gets lost in an ocean of blue eyes and a galaxy of freckled skin.

And then, Chuuya stirs.

He looks at Dazai, giving him the fixed expression of someone who barely slept at all. Forged by many nightly emergencies, they both wake up in the same way other people flip a switch — on and off, a jarring rise to consciousness.

Chuuya's eyes are wide and alert. They're cornflower blue in the faint light of Dazai's dorm room, as if a distracted god has spilled ocean drops inside his irises. As if rain has fallen in Chuuya's soul for all the hardships he's been through, and it pooled into his eyes.

But the point is, the eyes clocking him are undeniably *awake,* and Dazai is suddenly very aware of how close he got.

"Huh," Chuuya mumbles, pulling away. "Sorry."

Dazai's mood plummets as he rushed away, bustling to put some much-needed space between them before he can do something he regrets.
Something dumb.

"Huh…Your alarm was ringing."

"Ah," Chuuya says. "Fuck, sorry. I must have set that by mistake."

“It’s okay.”

“I’m…” Chuuya hesitates, embarrassment flashing in his eyes as he realizes where he slept and where he stayed. He props his hand up and then drops it as if he’s just picked words over signs. “I’m gonna grab my shit and go.”

“Stay for breakfast,” Dazai offers in return.

The good thing about staring into Chuuya’s eyes while he speaks is that he notices how his partner’s gaze drops on his lips and can pretend it’s because his need to pull in for a kiss burns as desperately as Dazai’s own.

Which is obviously not the case — Chuuya is lip reading and he’s a moron — but daydreaming is nice.

Anyway.

The offer to stay for breakfast calls out Dazai in twenty languages (after all this time and mistakes he is, above all, a hopeless idiot that still hopes Chuuya *might* want to spend time with him) but he’s surprised when the other doesn’t turn him down.
‘Why not? I’m hungry,’ the executive says. Then, he declares that he’s going to make a run for the kombini downstairs and buy some breakfast while Dazai sets the table.

Dazai quickly gestures back. *I’m coming with you.*

No, Chuuya answers, fingers stiff as he waves his right hand in between them. *You’re just gonna slow me down.*

Dazai pouts. *Yes.*

To be fair, he always wins this kind of argument with Chuuya because he has a feeling the other doesn’t even try to push him away for real, so breakfast it is.

When they bump into Kunikida and Tanizaki in the corridor, the two men shoot Dazai perplexed glances.
To be fair, he is not sure what surprised them the most: if the fact that he’s been drinking with an enemy, or if the fact that he’s been drinking with a mafioso who would rather jump in front of a train than spend time with him.
Allegedly, that is.

“Chibi stayed for a drink,” he explains, although his stomach churns under the inquisitive gazes of his colleagues.

Having a high-ranked mafia executive stay for a drink in his own dorm room is a bold choice that doesn’t necessarily comply with the Agency’s policy. Alas, the Agency’s moral conduct is also something Dazai doesn’t give a single fuck about when it comes to seeing his ex-partner.

It’s not like he’s betraying anybody but his own dignity by keeping his (stale to the point that it’s getting embarrassing) crush around.

Unfazed, Chuuya just dips his head at the two detectives. He doesn't speak, only tapping his hat.
He doesn't even ask what Dazai said to them and, apparently, Dazai might not be the only one who cares very little about what people think of them.

They pass by each other, and that's the end of it.

In an attempt to cut short the bothersome task of feeding himself, Dazai has already memorized most of the menu offered by the nearby 7/11 during weekends.
Their melon pans are decent.
The katsu sandos remain forgettable, although Atsushi loves them. And they always have fresh all-strawberries fruit sandwiches, which is a nice thing to have for his sweet tooth and constant need for processed sugar.

Chuuya is wearing a slight frown as he points Dazai in the direction of the sandwiches, pinching his sleeve and tugging softly to attract his attention.

"You still like those, right?" he asks, turning to face Dazai.

He bobs his head. "Yeah. I still eat a lot of these. Actually, how do you say this—" Dazai indicates the fruit sandwiches — "in sign language?"

Chuuya's lips twitch, eyes darting from Dazai to the fridge. He stops, then he rolls back his head and explodes in a surprised, stunned laughter.

"Don't know, honestly. I'm gonna check later."

"Let's do that," Dazai chirps. "I'll get two of those, in the meantime. Strawberry or mixed?"

Chuuya cocks an eyebrow. "What was the last one?"

"Mixed," Dazai replies, moving his lips around the word as he spells the sounds. "Like, custard and cream and kiwis and strawberries."

"Ha?! You'll get cavities."

As the sliding door of the shop rings to notify another customer, Dazai takes out the phone. Someone's laughing, too, and the fridges buzz and the place seems way too crumpled with obnoxious noises to have a conversation.
He types up a new note before handing the object to Chuuya.

'I'll take the risk and get one of each,' he's written in the message. He never deletes the older conversations, saving them like pieces of a treasure map. They are all tiny, precious pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that composes Double Black.

With a *hmpf* from his nostrils, Chuuya takes the phone and answers: ' *Suit yourself, asshat. Do you want coffee too?'*

'I'll have strawberry milk.'

'What? Your shitty breakfast is literally just bread and custard and milk and sugar!' Chuuya gapes a little, looking at Dazai with bulging eyes before handing him back the device as if it's going to explode in his grip. *'I'm gonna cook you something real for a change, yeah?'*

Reading the text, Dazai allows himself a small nod.
It's been a long time since he had homemade food, and Chuuya was always a good cook.
He had little choice but to become one while caring for the Sheep.
But, even if Dazai doesn't hate the idea of Chuuya revolutionizing his kitchen and restocking his sad, sad fridge —theoretically and at some point during the day — he's not in a rush to go home.
Besides, he doesn't enjoy the idea of sharing the man's attention with a *meal.*

(Is he jealous of *food,* now? Wow. Hello, rock bottom, long time no see.)

'We can do some grocery shopping later, sure. But what about we get something here now and go eat someplace nice? Like a park or something.'

'Just so you know, I'm not paying for your cavities.'

'I was about to say that it's my treat.'

Still scowling, Chuuya reads the message and side-glances at him. *'Huh? Why?'*

'What kind of master would I be if I didn't spoil my dog, once in a while?'

He supposes his smile might not be entirely believable — which is unfair. He is always entirely cheerful when he smiles at his partner — because Chuuya's scowl only deepens.

'What do you want in return?'

'Nothing,' Dazai types up. His fingers fly across the keyboard and, when he hands his partner the phone, he can't dare to meet his eyes. *'Chuuya's company is enough.'*

When Chuuya downplays the comment and calls him a weasel, Dazai scratches his ear with fake timidness and a sharp mirth dancing in his eyes. He *is* a weasel. He's damn good at it, too. But there's no bite in their bickering, no venom in their words, and the innocent back-and-forth feels *nice*.
Counting that as a victory, the detective grabs two fruit sandwiches and pretends that Chuuya judging his eating habits is the most annoying thing on earth (it's not) and that he'll let himself die of starvation (too painful).

They get unceremoniously kicked out of the kombini after he tried to buy a gigantic pack of dog food 'for his favorite sheepdog' and the executive glowed red and hurled the pack at his head. Dazai mulls that he will have to talk his way into escaping the blacklist at some point, but it's fine. It's a nice morning. He's with Chuuya. The sun shines over Yokohama. The birds chirp above their heads.

Dazai is laughing and Chuuya is holding their shopping and it's a good, *good* day.

Soon after, they end up sitting on the concrete — they have found a quiet spot on the shore, far away from the busy promenade that connects the red brick houses to the Cosmo Clock 21. Sitting cross-legged on the concrete, Dazai's nostrils flare with the scent of the sea.

The sunlight warms his skin, caressing his bandaged arms, painting a thousand shades of gold in Chuuya's long hair.
They eat in almost-silence, only interrupted by the rustle of the plastic bag that Chuuya settled between them.

When Dazai runs his right hand over the back of his left one — "beautiful," he's saying — he's looking at Chuuya. The executive's chest empties with a deep, long sigh.

Yes, it's pretty, he gestures. *What are the sounds like?*

Dazai looks at him, blinking, not entirely sure about how to react or what to answer. *Did you wear your hearing aid?* He might ask, only realizing now that he didn't notice — wondering when did he stop to be aware of that detail at all times, relying on it as a plant relies on sunlight.
But he also might have misinterpreted the question, too busy staring at Chuuya's naked fingers to bother with their meaning. So, instead of answering, he blinks in confusion.

What? He gestures.

"It's not about hearing, you know," Chuuya clarifies with a certain urgency. When he's lazy, or when he's relaxed, his words blend — it's melodious, how his tones fluctuate. "It's about remembering. So, tell me what you hear."

Dazai considers signing his answer, for a moment, but then he takes out his phone.

The right words might escape him, and he's found that he still prefers the medium of communication he is already familiar with. Opening himself up to new ways of communication is solely a means to an end, feeding his need to spend more time with his partner.

He's not sure what that makes him: if a human, a glutton for something that's obviously out of his reach, or just an asshole.

'I hear seagulls,' he writes. *'Well— gulls are gulls, and they screech and they sound like they want to murder someone. That's hardly exciting. Their voices are unpleasant, sharp. If you want a soothing sound instead, look at the waves. It's like an embrace every time they curl and swell, just before hitting the stone. It's a smooth sound, the one of water against the quay.'*

Chuuya nods.

'What does the wind sound like, today?'

'Howling. It's a low-pitched, heavy howling. It gets in your ears and sneaks into your bones. But I can barely hear it because of the cars nearby.'

‘So the waves are silk,’ Chuuya types. *‘The seagulls and cars are loud. The wind is howling.’*

Dazai’s heart skips a beat as an idea blooms in his mind.

He takes a deep breath, and types: *‘Thinking about it, it sounds just like that night after Operation Goodbye, when we were sixteen. Do you remember?’*

He doesn’t *have* to ask if Chuuya remembers, for he’s quite sure neither of them will ever forget their first successful mission together as a true, fully-fledged team, but the question is entirely self-serving: Dazai wants to *see* the answer written on Chuuya’s face.
He wants to keep the conversation safe inside his phone and guard it for the rest of time.

Nods and facial expressions — memories, that is — can be volatile. Dazai doesn’t want anything that can be erased or twisted by time, not right now. Not when Chuuya’s eyes widen as he reads the message, and his shoulders tremble and his nostrils quiver as he inhales.

‘Yeah, of course I do. The sea at night.’

Dazai closes his eyes, breathing at the rhythm of his fastened pulse.
He will never forget the sea opening in front of them — a never-ending, lazy expanse of black ink, and the full moon and their bloodied hands after decimating a rival organization in minutes. Mere minutes. They used to be terrifying on the battlefield, but Dazai remembers the times they shared post-mission as an unfaltering oasis of tranquility. Just him and Chuuya and the waves and the wind.

‘Chuuya had stolen a pack of smokes from one of the bodyguards we killed. Stealing from the dead is such a shameless behavior; Chibi's truly a heartless mafioso.’

Chuuya barks out a loud chuckle. Even that sound didn’t change; honest and cheerful. If Chuuya’s chuckle could have a shape, it’d be a star.

‘I remember everything from that night,’ Chuuya writes.

God, Dazai too.

‘Then, I guess, imagine the same sounds now.’

Chuuya swallows.
When he opens his mouth and licks his front teeth and buys some time, he looks like he’s about to say something. But then the redhead also closes his lips, pressing them together as if speaking might reveal a secret he’s not ready to let go.
After a silence that seems to last forever, Dazai writes:

‘Did Arahabaki change at all, after the accident?’

Instantly, Chuuya pinches his index finger and thumb together. *It’s the same.*

Dazai might be a lazy student, mostly relying on written notes and Chuuya’s lip-reading skills because learning a new language requires a level of commitment that he’s not used to, but the executive is a zealous teacher.

He will throw sign language in the mash any time he can, just for the sake of Dazai getting accustomed to signing. Dazai said he wanted to learn, and Chuuya will teach him. It's as axiomatic as that.

Their feelings may be complicated, but their collaboration has always been simple.

'I already told you this, but I'm sorry,' Dazai writes, while silently patting himself on the back for his somewhat stable grip on the phone despite the trembling of his hands. *'About the car, but also about leaving.'*

'It's okay.'

'Would you consider leaving with me now?'

Chuuya looks at the message, then rubs the back of his neck. "My life is here."

"You can have a life with the Agency," Dazai says.

You can have a life with me, he means.

"I'm happy with the Port Mafia, Dazai," it's the answer. "They are my family."

It's all the detective needs to let the matter go, really, because he will not uproot Chuuya for a caprice of his infatuated heart. He was fifteen when he manipulated the redhead into leaving the Sheep, although he did that under Mori's influence. It wasn't entirely his fault, but he'd be lying if he said he didn't *desire* to eradicate Chuuya from an organization that didn't cherish, understand or value him as a person. For some alien reason, Dazai wanted to be better for that violent teen with the angry voice and lonely eyes — a better partner, someone who wouldn't just use him.
However, even if stealing Chuuya away seemed like a fantastic idea to his fifteen-year-old self, at twenty-two Dazai refuses to perpetrate the same mistakes.

He drops his head instead, the nod laconic as it cannibalizes the need for further words.

Chuuya won't leave with him; not after Dazai allowed him to get accustomed to his absence.

I am sorry for leaving you, he signs. He emphasizes pointing at Chuuya, meaning that he doesn't give a flying damn about the rest of the Port Mafia.

It was Chuuya he missed all along.

It's Chuuya he wants now.

There was no one else he cared about. No one else means a thing.

"You were grieving a friend, Dazai. It's okay. I know what that feels like."

"Chuuya didn't leave when the Flags died."

“Because that’s not how *I* cope with loss. I punch the shit out of it and you don't, and that's okay. But I never had someone telling me to change my ways and become a good person, either.”

“Nonetheless, I acted without thinking about how that would change your life, and that's not how you're supposed to treat a partner,” Dazai insists, eyes roaming across Chuuya’s face to find the hurt, the resentment he deserves for tearing their partnership apart. He knows that Chuuya's anger for his defection is there. It *must* be there.
But then the executive looks at him with shoulders back and chin up, serene, and it really seems like he never hated Dazai at all.

“Oh, spare me; there is nothing objective in the decisions we take while grieving, ya ass.”

"I fucked up," he says.

"Right," Chuuya answers. "Because you're human."

Dazai swallows.
When I left, he gestures, *I should have said goodbye to you. I promise I wanted to, but I was a mess.*

Well, his goodbye was bombing Chuuya’s car as one last inside joke, something Chuuya would be mad at him for but not really — something they would laugh about in due time, a prank not different than all the times a much younger Slug almost sent him to the ER with his so-called punishments.
But he's not keen on bringing that explosion up now. They both know how that ended.

Chuuya shrugs. “Look at us now, huh.”

“Old, single and eating supermarket food?”

“*Survivors,”* Chuuya corrects him. “I'm sure it hurt a lot, but you turned your life around, Dazai." As he says it, the redhead tilts his face to the side, and beams. A beam brighter than the sun itself — and he looks twenty-two, young and carefree and as if he’s never been sullied by death and blood before. It punches the air out of Dazai’s guts. “Let’s keep doing our best, okay?”

—

Trust Dazai on this: being arrested sucks.

—

He swears he is going to kill Fyodor.

It doesn’t even matter if he’ll do it inside this godforsaken prison or outside, he’ll just do it.

Prison life sucks.
Meursault might be a lovely little town, but the prison? Terrible. The food was unsavory, the

company was questionable, their pest control let a rat make his nest in the cell next to Dazai and now he's locked in a game without winners.

Fabulous.
Just *fabulous.*

To make the matter worse, Dazai hasn't seen Chuuya in months and wasn't exactly looking forward to meeting him again under such grim circumstances.
The fact that he's fighting against his partner in a prison, cold and poisoned and frankly quite malnourished, doesn't exactly enhance his mood. He's annoyed. Cold, hungry, hurting all over and pissed as fuck.

"Chuuya," he takes a deep breath. "This is my goodbye to you, too."

He's standing in the control room of Meursault's high-security prison, with a microphone brushing his lips and venom rushing in his veins. The curtain is finally up.

This will be the price de resistance of an insane game they have been playing: the ultimate deception. Chuuya and Fyodor, drowning. A patina of cold sweat sticks to Dazai's hands as he bends over the microphone of the control room.

He can see Chuuya from the camera, struggling to stay afloat. And the water must be so cold now; it almost reached the man's chin. Soon, it will be enough to cover his hat.

And he must be suffering so, and Dazai's heart screams and he wishes and wishes and wishes that Chuuya could hear him.

The cold is in his bones, now, mirroring the heavy water submerging Chuuya. It's in his soul.

And this might be the longest, most difficult second of his life, but Dazai holds on to the command board and sinks his nails in the plastic. Either unconscious because of the vampire curse or not, Chuuya would not hear him either way. And it's better this way, because there are things that Dazai has been keeping to himself — things he needs to let out before they finally catch up to him.
They have been choking him, lately.

He can feel Sigma staring at him, waiting. No doubt, he's wondering why Dazai is wasting time on melancholic speeches during a race against time.

But Dazai only sighs and lifts his head, collecting his courage.

He won't rush *this.*

"I know you can't hear me, Slug, so let me use this occasion to say something I have always wanted to get off my chest: I pity you. I've always pitied you — your dog-like obedient attitude and your blind faith in a power that doesn't give a damn about you. It's been a long time since we've met. And sure, there have been times when our hearts have been close, and we have understood each other. But—"

The words fade out. His tone lowers, and the water rises.

“But sometimes we’ve hurt each other, too.” He giggles to himself, gravelly, and his throat hurts as he grasps the control panel. “This is the moment when I should deny that I’ve ever liked you at all. And it’s true. I’ve never liked you, Chuuya. I never liked your stupid hat and your unnecessarily loud voice and your silly face.”

Dazai breathes in. Out.

Who would have thought? He’s concocted a fake anti-confession to a partner who is drowning, and who can’t hear him, just to buy time and make sure Fyodor won’t doubt Chuuya’s loyalty and servitude to the Decay of Angels.
He *knows* how Fyodor disposes of the useless weapons, and he needs the rat to believe he can send Chuuya after him to finish him off. He needs to make everybody believe that Chuuya will kill his own partner if Fyodor orders him to. To do so, Dazai needs to kill their *bond* first.

And, as every word fights its way up his throat, he supposes Chuuya deserved better than this betrayal, but it’s all he can offer for now.
That’s all he can think of to get them both out of Meursault.

“I despise you.”

‘I love you.’

He shoots a glance behind his shoulder, meeting Sigma’s horrified eyes. They’re so wide that Dazai fears they might roll out of his skull at any moment — beads of lucid lilac, lodged out of their sockets because of him.

Curtly, Dazai flashes him a smirk. *It's okay,* he means, folding on himself a little and holding onto the control deck as if it can keep him from falling to his knees. He wonders what Sigma will make of these cruel words spilling out of his mouth.

He has no intention of letting Chuuya drown for real, that was never the plan, but he needs to sell it to Fyodor. He needs to make him think that Chuuya is expendable and that their bond is nothing but a joke of a partnership.
He has to make it work, or it’ll all be for nothing.

“I have always hated you more than anything else in the world.”

‘I have loved you since the day we met. Always did. Never stopped.’

He has no intention of letting Chuuya die, but then why is his voice fading away into an aching whisper? Why does it hurt so much? Why is love percolating into his tone against his will?

Why?

Why?

“Guess it’s a pity that Slugs can’t swim.”

‘I’m sorry I have hurt you. It was never intentional.’

“Goodbye.”

—

“Hey! Hey, hang in there!”

Dazai wills himself to crack one eye open. He can’t feel his lower half; the fall has shattered his bones and turned his right leg into a pulp. Although he can’t be sure, the subtle whistle rising from his left lung whenever he tries to inhale might not be a good sign.

Being punched and kicked repeatedly by a barely-conscious Chuuya bound to Dostoyevsky’s will didn’t help, either.
But… Chuuya. *Chuuya.*
Chuuya’s in terrible shape, too, but he’s alive. He’s *awake.*
Yosano can fix them both later. She secretly loves to treat Dazai, which gives her the chance to showcase her ability as a doctor and not as a gifted ability user.

For now, though—

“Osamu.”

—for now—

“Ah.” He murmurs. Every hoarse word takes an enormous effort. “Chuuya hasn’t called me that…since we were…kids…”

“I’m gonna get you out. Ya hear? Please, please, stay with me. Please.” Chuuya’s voice breaks as if he’s speaking through sandpaper while sustaining Dazai’s upper half in his arms.

His harsh vowels scrape Dazai’s brain, not entirely pleasant.
With hands covered in blood and eyes oh so blue, Chuuya is hunched over him — cradling his body in an unholy imitation of the Sixth Sorrow. He’s yelling. He’s not a vampire anymore.
Rivers of red taint his palms, filtering through his fingers.

It looks just like that day with Odasaku, Dazai thinks, and a smile crosses his face.

It’s a somber one.
It’s weak, that smile that is half a joke and half a confession of unspoken adoration.

“Don’t yell,” he grinds out, forcing every word into a clear shape, “Slug.”

“Dazai, I—”

“It’s fine. It’s okay.”

Chuuya holds him tighter. “Nothing is fucking fine. I’m taking you out of here.”

“Don’t fret too much.” His head drops, exhaustion finally taking over. He’s not facing Chuuya, and he knows it’s an issue, yet his aching body refuses to listen when he tries to lift his chin. “Thank you, Chuuya,” he mumbles. *Thank you for not killing me. Thank you for being my partner, above all else*. “It’s really okay, I know what to do now. I—“

“I can’t hear you,” Chuuya cuts him in. It’s pleading, this time, soaked with anguish.

“Ah,” he only answers. He would hate to see Chuuya cry for him now.

“Osamu, please. Look at me.”

His hands shake around Dazai’s shoulders, grasping at the ruined uniform of the prison; what used to be white is now painted with crimson.

The sheer frustration of that comment emboldens Dazai to look at his partner’s ashen face and human eyes. He hates that Chuuya is grieving him while there’s still time to win this devilish game. But if they want to win, Dazai knows he has to look at Chuuya. He has to meet him halfway, and trust him, and know that his partner trusts him back.

“—I said it’s alright.”

“No, it’s not. *No.* Stay awake. Stay with me.” His voice disintegrates at the edges, ignited by a sense of hurry, searing holes in the fabric of Dazai’s tired synapses. “What’s the plan, Dazai? How are we going to get out?” His fingers sink into Dazai's flesh, and the contact touches off a rush of adrenaline down the detective’s spine. “You do have a plan, right? Tell me you have a plan.”

Tossing his head back, breathing around the pain, Dazai scoffs a burst of laughter.

Having failed to foresee that he’d end up with broken legs and internal bleeding after collapsing with an entire elevator, his key strategy now relied on hoping that Chuuya would not kill him under Dostoyevsky’s order.
He’d play it by ear from there.
Sigma is going to call for help — if they are still alive, as Dazai hopes.
Ango’s on his way, too.

A part of him also hoped that Chuuya’s hearing aid would still work despite the little splash Dazai forced upon him; that might have been optimistic, even for the circumstances.
But loving Chuuya turns him into a crazy person. It always did.
With his partner, he can take all the risks in the world. He’ll jump into hell with a grateful heart and a laugh on his lips.

His face contorts, and everything hurts and yet he can't feel most of his body.
It's a contradiction, yet there is no explanation or reason for the way everything hurts right now. “I knew Chuuya was going to be an obedient dog.” He pauses — head throbbing, every word dragging him closer to passing out. The blood loss has already blurred his vision.
“Sorry if I can’t sign now.”

“What?”

“Sorry.” He breathes in, willing himself to articulate every word as clearly as he can despite not feeling half his face. What a bother. “I can’t sign.”

“Fuck, don’t worry about *that* now…”

“Chuuya stopped,” he says. “You stopped Dostoyevsky’s order. I knew you’d stop.” He cracks a weak smirk, and Chuuya’s breath falters and Dazai can feel how his grip trembles as the executive sinks his nails in the white prison uniform.

His broken bones lacerate the skin, and his lungs sear as he coughs blood. His body burns, but the prison is getting so cold, and Chuuya looks so pale, and he sounds so distant—

Slowly, Dazai lifts a hand.
His fingers are cold against Chuuya’s cheek, his touch light while his partner’s breathing turns unsteady. It’s not a proper sign, but it will speak for him, anyway.

“Ne, Slug, don’t give me that look. I wouldn’t mind dying here…”

“Who said you’re allowed to die?! The backup squad will be here any moment, t—”

“…in Chuuya’s arms.”

Here, in a decaying building where everything looks so remote. In the arms of a partner that he’s loved all his life.

A place where no one will cry for them. Two corpses in the remnants of a secret prison, hidden away from history and from memory.

Pressing Dazai’s hand against his cheek, Chuuya addresses him with a weak smirk in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Shut up,” he mumbles. “Save your breath. *Idiot.”* Ah, Dazai thinks, can an insult be full of longing? “Ya know, red suits you.”

With an equally weak smile, Dazai gestures at his own blood and then at Chuuya.

Red reminds me of you.

Then his smile dies out and his hand drops, weakened by the poison and the fall and the fight.

It’s definitely not his best day, but it somehow gives Dazai hope that he’ll see another sunset.

Part of him would like to apologize if right here, passing out on the dirty floor, he’s reminding Chuuya of the Old World.

So, with the desperation that accompanies madmen and saints, Dazai acts. He grabs Chuuya’s jacket and pulls him down. The last effort causes his head to spin out of control, making him grunt in pain as his lips crash against Chuuya’s.

Their tongues taste like blood.
Rusty, salty. The kiss is desperate and clumsy — a last display of commitment from a half-dead man. Dazai can't really believe this will be their first and last kiss.
He doesn't *want* it to be their last.

This kind of kiss is not an ending; it's meant to be a beginning.

It's a short, chaste contact — merely a pressing of lips. Chuuya doesn't even have the time to react that Dazai has already pulled away.

"Now, *this* is how you kiss Snow White awake."

His voice sounds strained despite the breezy affection hidden in his cadence.

Although Chuuya lets out a small groan, Dazai is not sure the executive had the time to lip-read him at all. All he knows is that the last shadow of black in his partner's blue eyes retreats, and the plan is successful.
The vampirism has been defeated.

Without waiting for an answer, he drives Chuuya's face against his body. He sinks his nose in russet hair, inhaling as deeply as he can; it's damp, but it still smells like home.

He drops forward with all his weight, strengthless, nuzzling in the bloodied crook of Chuuya's neck.

He's tired.

He failed to realize just how tired he was before leaning his head on Chuuya's shoulder.

But, at least, they're going to be safe.

They are alive.

—

"So Chuuya says he doesn't remember a thing about Meursault?"

Crossing her arms in front of her chest, Yosano nods. The good thing about being found in a pool of blood tangled with Chuuya, both passed out and hanging to life by a thin thread, is that no one will question his motives when Dazai asks about his ex-partner's whereabouts. They blame it on the inevitable PTSD.
On his end, Dazai blames it on the fact that there hasn't been a day he hasn't spent thinking of that kiss.

"More or less," Yosano answers, her raven hair bouncing with the movement as she drops her head in a nod. "The physical effort of fighting back the vampirism and the general battle has likely damaged his memory, but it might be self-preservation. Everything that happened was quite traumatic."

"Tell me about it," he hums.

“So maybe he’s just blocking out the memories.”

Which, for the record, is a fair reaction. Dazai wishes that *his* own brain would finally become smart enough to block out all the traumatizing stuff he has been through.

“But he’s okay.”

“He’s fine,” Yosano agrees. “You should know that Kouyou doesn’t talk to me that much, Dazai. Ask her directly, if you want someone to spill tea on Nakahara.”

His eyebrows dart up, suddenly curious. “I thought you two were going out.”

“Yeah. Occasionally, mostly for drinks or to have fun. So I’m sorry if *your* crush is not one of *our* talking points.”

Dazai scrunches his nose. “That’s nonsense. For the record, I don’t have a crush on the Slug.”

Yosano cocks an eyebrow at him. She stares as if she’s part of a secret circle, aware of something Dazai is not allowed to know or that he could not grasp even if she tried to explain.

“Sure,” she echoes.

When she moves on to discuss his legs and questions him about their recovery, Dazai dismisses the conversation quickly.
How is he supposed to explain? He’s going to be fine. His legs and his spine and the poison circulating in his blood vessels were never the problem. His *heart* is.

—

Most people look for a soulmate.

A love for life.

Someone who will grow old by their side: they meet, and they get married, and they buy a house and grow old by the same fireplace.

Dazai has never wanted to live long.
He’s never been hungry for life, he is not looking for somebody to get old with.

But then Chuuya happened — and he is not sure why life gave him *Chuuya,* but here they are. Dazai was forever changed after their meeting.
He was never looking for a reason to stay around; he was never looking for a reason to delay or fear death.

Still, the obvious catch of falling for a Port Mafia executive is that a long life is not a given. Hell, becoming old is not even a given for ordinary people.
Likely, they will both die young and gruesome deaths.

But he remains Dazai’s ‘in sickness and in health’. He’s Dazai’s ‘until death do us part’.

Except that he has every intention to fight anything that might separate them, death included — and he'll have to accept that *his life* might not hold the same romantic value for Chuuya. It'd be fair.

When the executive exits Mori's office with empty eyes and massaging his temples with barely contained exasperation, Dazai jumps to his feet.

He doesn't even know what he expects from the confrontation.
He doesn't even know what he wanted to demonstrate by waiting for his former partner in the Mori Corp building like a stray puppy for its owner, but he *had* to meet Chuuya after what happened in France.

"Oh," Chuuya exhales, stopping as his eyes land on him.

Dazai gives him back a wave. "I came to walk you home."

Chuuya frowns. "What?! I don't need you to walk me home."

He nods. *I know.*

Why, then?

We need to talk, he signs. *And, before you turn me away, I don't have an umbrella.*

It's pouring, outside, and Dazai could likely buy an umbrella if he really wanted to — or ask at the reception for one.
Mika from the reception desk One A always had a thing for him, she'd find him an umbrella if he asked her.

But he's glad to learn that Chuuya doesn't fight the pitiful excuse.
He just nods, and taps his chest — *Gotcha* — and heads to the entrance of the building.

Compared to Meursault, the weather in Yokohama is pretty damn depressing; what was sunny and warm in France is damp and cold in Japan.

In silence, as they walk side by side, Dazai wonders if Chuuya misses the city and the chaos; he stayed behind for a few weeks, touring France alone.
He refused any company, saying that he needed a few weeks to decompress and re-center himself after almost dying several times in a 'sad as fuck French prison'.
Dazai, on the other hand, couldn't leave Europe fast enough.

So here they are, after escaping death, walking side-by-side under the same umbrella as if nothing ever happened. Obviously, as the *'Tall half of Double Black,'* Dazai declared that it was his duty to hold the umbrella.
He decided so.
Chuuya threatened to punch him for being a smartass about it, but he didn't.
No matter how much he tries to press himself by Chuuya's side, Dazai's right shoulder is soaked and his hair is puffy and his trench coat is sprinkled with raindrops.

The wall of water dropping violently against the sidewalk, together with the sounds from the street, fills the silence.
It's like an angry deity has decided to pour buckets of water over the world — and the memory of water in his muscles makes Dazai shiver.

Together with a general dislike for elevators, he is pretty sure Meursault left him with a trauma against pools.

"I didn't mean to drown you," he says, turning his head to allow Chuuya to see his lips.

"And I didn't mean to make fun of your broken legs," Chuuya offers.

Dazai waves the umbrella a little, smiling and shrugging off the comment in an unspoken gesture of dismissal.
It's all water off a duck's back.
Nothing of what they said or did mean shit outside of Meursault.

"Are you…"

"Back to normal? Not a bloodsucker anymore?" Chuuya interrupts him. "Yeah."

Silence falls among them again. It's tough to lip-read while walking, and the rain is garbling the sounds, and using sign language is tricky while holding an umbrella and without winning a free (freezing) shower in the rain.
So, Dazai comfortably settles in the silence. He basks in it. He finds reassurance in it.

It's Chuuya who first takes out his phone, sending him a text.
The ping coming from his pocket almost makes Dazai wince in anticipation.

'Are you sure you are okay? You fell from an elevator.'

He smiles. ' *And Chuuya was a vampire.'*

'I hurt you.'

'It's okay,' he replies.

'I'm sorry,' Chuuya texts. *'I'm sorry that, no matter what, people will use me to force you into situations you don't want.'*

Puzzled, Dazai looks up. "What do you mean?" he mouths.

'Doc Glasses gave me the transcript of your little goodbye speech. Nice bluff.'

Shit.
His heart hiccups and he's not sure where this is going, but *he* is certainly going to pay Ango a little visit. He would love to know what the hell is the man's problem, meddling in his business like this.
But he doesn't have time to find a proper answer, because Chuuya is still writing.

‘You know, Dazai,’ the next text says. *‘That speech, and the entire Meursault situation, reminded me of something.’*

Ah, he thinks, with a dry throat. So Chuuya remembers — *what* does he remember, though?

‘Like what?’ He texts back.

‘When I was eighteen, I was terrified of forgetting how Ane-San sounded. Or Hirotsu. Adam. Shirase. I can’t hear The Flags’ anymore no matter how much I’d like to, and it hurts, but I can still remember something. Mostly single words. Sounds. So I thought I was used to it — I’m kinda used to losing shit I cared about. ’

Chuuya throws a glance at him -- waiting for seconds that feel like hours, almost expecting a reply, before sighing and adding another message before pressing send.
When he glares in the direction of Dazai’s phone to nudge the detective to read, it’s almost hesitant.

‘Then, one day, I realized I couldn’t remember your voice.

‘That hit me for real. That, no matter if you were coming back or not, I might never hear your voice again.’

Instantly, Dazai’s eyes widen.
Chuuya was grasping at the memory of his cadence or his tone, clinging to something that was slipping away out of his control, and he wasn’t there.
He wasn’t *there.*
There’s one last sentence, and it slaps the detective square in the face:

‘I don’t want to lose any other part of you.’

In that moment, Dazai decides he can’t silence himself anymore. He can’t stand seeing Chuuya look at the screen of his phone with empty eyes, as if he’s facing the loneliness of their past and a future that someone else has already written for them.
He won’t let Chuuya lose anything — anyone — ever again.

He leans forward, the umbrella dipping with the gesture and sending thick, icy drops down his back. He ignored them.
He closes his eyes and takes the leap, and his lips meet Chuuya’s own.

The executive’s mouth parts in surprise.

They’re soft, Chuuya’s lips, and they taste familiar — like mint and coffee, and rain and home. He tastes like home.

That’s why, when Chuuya pushes him away, side-stepping out of his reach, Dazai has the impression of being rejected from the only safe place in the world.
The way Chuuya shoved him away is strong enough to cause him to drop the umbrella.

He feels as if his partner pushing him away just pulled a physical rug from under his feet,

causing him to fall from an invisible mountain. Lightheaded, not really sure what to do, Dazai blinks. When he rocks in place, trying to patch up what just happened, the imperfect silence pierces his ears.
All he sees are wide blue eyes and irises looking like beads of blue in a sea of white.

“The fuck?!” Chuuya all but screams, voice murky with confusion.

Horror, too. Disgust.

That hurts.

When Chuuya raises his index finger and touches it to the side of his right hand, the gesture is loaded with anger. *Why?!*

He slams the back of his left hand against the side of his right one, again. Again. *Why? Why?!*

Rain is gluing his copper hair to his forehead, running thin streams of water down his forehead — then the perfect line of his nose, his plump cheeks. His lips.

“I thought…” he starts, although his sentence drifts off into nothing. His arms are limp by his sides, so heavy that even signing seems out of his capabilities now.
He takes a step back just to physically distance himself from the temptation. “I thought *we*…”

Chuuya’s lips twitch downward. “I asked you for time.”

“I gave you nothing but time!” He snaps, voice rising out of his control.
He signs, too, to reiterate the concept. His fingers trip on themselves, movements so frantic that he has to go twice to make sure they are somewhat distinguishable from a fool gesturing in the air.

Then, with a scoff, finding himself at an impasse, he grabs his phone again.
Fat water drops fall on his screen as he types, the tapping of the water filling his ears and quickening his pulse.

Fuck sign language.

Fuck *speaking*.

He hates not being able to do something, and Chuuya has never felt as distant as he is now.

‘I have given you time but it was clearly not enough. I’m sorry. I thought you getting personal meant something else.’

‘Like what?!’

‘That you knew I like you, Chuuya. I’ve liked you for a pretty damn long time, and I don’t even care about you liking me back or whatnot. I just want you to know, because I can’t keep it inside any longer.’

Mouth agape, Chuuya stares at the text. His eyes are so big and blue, Dazai fears he might get lost in them.
He stares some more and doesn't move, and every second opens a paper cut under Dazai's skin.

The bleeding remains invisible, washed away by the rain, although it burns.

"I'll leave," Dazai assures, after a long moment of silence, retreating his phone into his pocket. It feels like, with that gesture, he just lost a war. He retreats. He *gives up.* "Meursault was a lot to digest and you are right, you did ask me to leave you alone. I'm sorry. You can tell Mori to not pair us up anymore."

He turns.

He knows he has got to leave, lest he might say something he doesn't mean — like that Chuuya *has* to be in love with him, because this pull that drives them together doesn't make sense otherwise. He wants to scream that he gave Chuuya enough time, but that will never be enough if they don't try to forgive each other.
He will lose his patience, and he doesn't want Chuuya to hear how much he's been pining over him for years.
It's a burden that is his alone to carry.

So Dazai can walk home alone, get drunk on cheap beer and pretend his heart is not broken.

It's better this way for everybody.

At least that's what he tries to do, but he can't.

Chuuya grabs the back of his trench coat, pushing it down his shoulders a little. Keeping him in place, anchored to the sidewalk and dead still. Even without Tainted, Dazai finds himself a slave of gravity.

And then—

"…Stay."

Chuuya's pleading tone hits his stomach. His heart is next, fisted in a grip that halts his pulse for enough seconds that Dazai finds that he can't quite breathe.
He's choking in the silence. Staring at the road without the chance to turn, Dazai gapes.

While keeping him still from his trench coat, holding onto the light fabric with a shaky fist, Chuuya takes a deep breath. The rain is loud around them. The road is empty. But Dazai has a feeling that the one-way communication is shielding the executive: as if he won't hear a rejection this way.
As if Dazai would *ever* reject him.

"I don't want you to go away," Chuuya says, barely above a whisper, as if the words are not meant to leave his mouth at all.

Dazai's heart beats in his windpipe, quivering and thrashing like a trapped bird.

Tu-thump.

"It's been seven years."

Tu-thump.

"You are insufferable," Chuuya goes on, voice empty. He pauses, in a way that tells Dazai he's trying to imagine his own tone or remember a word that only comes to him in signs. "You are selfish, egoistic and an asshole. You underpromise and overdeliver all the time because the truth is that you're worried about everybody, even if no one knows it. And you sacrifice yourself for others. I can't stand you. I really hate you."

Tu-thump.

"But I'm tired of this game, Dazai. I can't anymore. And I'm probably the only idiot here because, when you came back, I thought I was over you." Chuuya's fingers shake, and so does Dazai's core. When his grip reinforces around the coat, Dazai swears that the connection is the only thing keeping him from crumbling. Another heartbeat. Another second of intolerable agony. "But no. You came back, and I knew you were likely *toying* with me yet I just fell deeper and harder for your bullshit. Even if I didn't know what to do, or how to stop it."

"I know," Dazai whispers.

He knows Chuuya won't hear it anyway, but he wonders if he'll feel the vibration of his sentence through their linked limbs.

"But—" Chuuya's fist clenches and Dazai wonders if the executive knows that he's holding Dazai's self-worth between his gloved fingers. "—I wouldn't be mad if you stayed."

After that, Chuuya releases him. It's almost a testament to their undying loyalty; as if the executive can't stand to keep clinging to him under a sky that seems to be bawling its eyes out in front of their tragic choices.

There was water at Meursault.

There's water now.

So much water; so much unsaid.

As he turns to face the other, Dazai wets his lips. He shivers with the chilly rain slipping down his collar — down his spine.

Chuuya, he gestures. He's been practicing his signed Japanese all this time, yet it feels useless when he's about to lose the only person he learned it for. *Your hearing aid is getting wet.*

“Don’t,” Chuuya mumbles. It’s full of anger, of frustration. It’s feeble and yet loud, and the way Chuuya’s shoulders tremble under the rain fills Dazai with a tender kind of anguish. “Stop worrying about me. You can’t do what you did at Meursault and act like nothing happened.” His vocal cords tremble. “You can’t—”

You can’t kiss me and act like it was nothing, he seems to say. Although Chuuya’s voice dies before he can say the words, Dazai hears it anyway. *So Chuuya does remember,* he thinks. He’s not sure if he should rejoice, though; not yet.

Because this is the moment that will change a desperate man's life. The moment when Chuuya could kiss him or kick him to Mars and stop talking to him altogether, this time for good, because Dazai is pretty damn sure they will never manage to be just friends.
This is the moment that changes the course of their lives. *The* moment.

Slowly, he steps forward.

“What about now?”

Chuuya's eyebrows arch. “Huh?”

Can I kiss Chuuya now? He signs.

Although Dazai has every intention of taking the secret to the tomb with him, that was one of the first sentences he learned. This is the sentence he’s rehearsed in front of the mirror, and while pretending to work at the Agency. This is the sentence he can’t get wrong.
He doesn’t dare say it out loud.

Pink dusts Chuuya’s cheeks. It’s hard to tell if he should blame the cold or the conversation, but then the executive also drops his head in a gesture of acceptance. Dazai’s stomach falls to his shins.

The first step he takes might count as the hardest step in his life. It feels like crossing an ocean, like peaking a mountain.

He steps forward and Chuuya stays still — quivering just so when Dazai’s hand covers his cheek.

I like you, he gestures, pinching his index finger and thumb under his chin and moving his hand down. It almost looks like he’s drawing a heart with his face and his fingers. *I like Chuuya very much.*

The executive swallows, looking up at him with big, dazed eyes.
He’s sodden — they both are — and rivulets of rainwater glue the collar of his black jacket to his skin, sticking his hair to his neck.

He looks like a wet kitten.
The mental image makes Dazai grin as he drives an almost-brownish, soaked strand away from Chuuya’s face, tugging it behind his ear — and he can’t believe how still the man

remains under his fingertips. He seems stunned into silence as if he never suspected Dazai's feelings in the slightest.

"I like you," Dazai stresses, for the sake of clarity. "So I want to kiss you."

"You like me," Chuuya insists. It still sounds perplexed.

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Well," Dazai echoes, with a burst of laughter softening the impatience in his voice; it translates into light in his eyes. "I thought it was obvious. Chuuya is the one who pushed me away."

"You took me by surprise," the executive admits, scrunching his nose. Then, somewhat challengingly, he steps forward. "You should really, really—" His voice dips into a gritty murmur. *"—really* try again."

Chuckling lightly, but not failing to notice how Chuuya subtly swayed his face up in a mute invitation, Dazai leans closer. Their noses bump together and Chuuya's breath ghosts warm over Dazai's mouth, the detective smiles. He kisses Chuuya again, framing his face in his hands, and savors every second of it.

I love you, the steady pulse of his heartbeat says. *I love you more than words can communicate.*
I love you in every language, and then some more.

Maybe their bond was never beyond salvation, after all.

—

"You caught a cold, lad?!"

Chuuya rubs a hand over his face, staring at the screen of the phone resting over the sheets and on his thigh.

Dazai adjusts himself against the pillow, following the conversation with a feline, content expression on his face.

The morning started off well.

For a start, Dazai is *entirely* enjoying the sight of the naked man next to him, with his toned muscles and flushed skin and kiss-swollen lips. He can almost read Kouyou's surprise in the transcription going on Chuuya's screen as if it wasn't obvious enough from her pauses.

"I'm sorry, Ane-San," Chuuya is saying, still looking at the words with a slightly mortified expression on his handsome face. He scratches his neck, scrambling for an excuse, and Dazai's lips curl as he notices the bites he left the night before on the elegant line of his partner's jugular. "I'll need to take the day off."

“How did you even catch a cold? You were fine yesterday.”

“Huh. It’s a long story.” Chuuya throws him a quick glance, face flushed, and Dazai’s heart takes a genuine leap. “A lot of rain.”

“Rain?”

“Yeah. Rain.”

“…Is Dazai-kun there?”

Even the transcript seems wary.

Dazai hesitates, staring at the grey words tumbling one over the other on Chuuya’s phone for a long moment. Only when Chuuya taps his shoulder — encouragingly, or so he supposes — does Dazai lean forward, getting closer to the device.

“Yeah. Hello.”

Kouyou hums, taking a second to consider the entire mess of the situation. Not that she can imagine that he and Chuuya kissed in the rain until their lips hurt, until they couldn’t feel their hands anymore. They forgot the umbrella on the sidewalk. Chuuya’s hearing implant is damaged beyond salvation (‘Here goes another one,’ the executive said, unimpressed. ‘Thank God the mafia is loaded’) and will need to be changed.

And Dazai left all his fear and insecurities in that street, too.

What follows is a heartbeat of awkward silence in which Dazai stares at Chuuya and Chuuya casts a glance at him right back; he rolls his eyes, then, and Dazai almost bursts into laughter.

But at least Kouyou seems pleased with the turn of events when she speaks again.

“Very well,” she says, and a half-restrained giggle rings in her approval. “Use protections, you two.”

“Ane-San!”

—

Chuuya, Dazai gestures, briefly squeezing the other’s hand. *Are you really sure about this?*

For what feels like a lifetime, Chuuya’s blue eyes stare at him before he scowls, pointing at the closed door in front of them. It leads to the Agency’s meeting room, where Hirotsu and Kouyou have already joined Kunikida and Yosano.

Yes, Chuuya answers, with a slight frown settling over his brow. *Why? Are* you *not sure?*

No, no. Kunikida-kun is going to flip the table, and maybe pop a vessel. He smiles. *It’s going to be awesome.*

Chuuya sighs.
You're an ass. I don't understand what you're so smug about.

With an eloquent glance, Dazai juts his chin to the angle of Chuuya's chest. He motions at his heart, more specifically; the one that belongs to Dazai, and that he offered to his partner in return.

Us, he explains. *I'll always be smug about us, Chibi.*

Not a second of hesitation or uncertainty sidles into the quick movements of his hands.

Now Dazai knows 26 languages.
It's a small, incommensurable victory. Although Chuuya still prefers to speak, he gives Dazai lessons in signed Japanese whenever he can. And they've been flying under the radar for a while, stitching together their personal relationship in the privacy of Chuuya's penthouse, but being able to walk into a joint meeting holding the hand of the person he loves is a newfound form of blessing.

Ha?! Why do I have to say it that way, you ass? Can't I go into a meeting with my— His hands stop mid-air, and embarrassment paints Chuuya's cheeks red. He looks away as he gestures: *—With my partner?*

Dazai's grin stretches.

Does Chuuya mean boyfriend?

"Same shit," Chuuya mumbles, through gritted teeth.

The reaction is nothing short of delightful for Dazai, whose heart leaps with a blend of affection and arousal (a rather potent mix, especially in public) whenever Chuuya acts flustered (adorable) because of something he said (usually something cheesy just for the sake of the aforementioned blush). He's trying to control himself. He is. But damn, when Chuuya blushes like *this*, and hides his face in his hands like *so*—

He can't win.

He can't win, and it's okay.

Gracefully accepting defeat, Dazai throws his head back and laughs, and pulls Chuuya in for a kiss.

His life has been good, lately.

Because you see: Dazai has been in love with his partner — Gravity Manipulator Nakahara Chuuya, a one-man platoon, a terrible sommelier and a decent cook and the only man Dazai Osamu could ever love — for eight years, three-hundred days, eighteen minutes, and he lost track of how many seconds.

It was never a choice.

It was always fate.

As Dazai grabs Chuuya's waist and pulls him in for one last kiss before they cross the Agency's door, sneaking a hand in the back pocket of the executive's trousers, he knows they will never stop finding one another.

End Notes

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And thanks to Blue, or this fic would never exist in the first place. I absolutely adore your brain, and your AUs, and I'm so glad to be your friend ❤️

Keeping Dazai's POV was a deliberate choice, as I don't have first-hand experience of deafness, but I poured all my research and personal experience into this fic.
I hope you enjoyed the result! Kudos and comments are always my lifeblood so lmk your thoughts.
I'm not ruling out the possibility of a second one-shot with established SKK (and smut lolol), so let me know if you'd like that ❤️

Twitter and CuriousCat.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!